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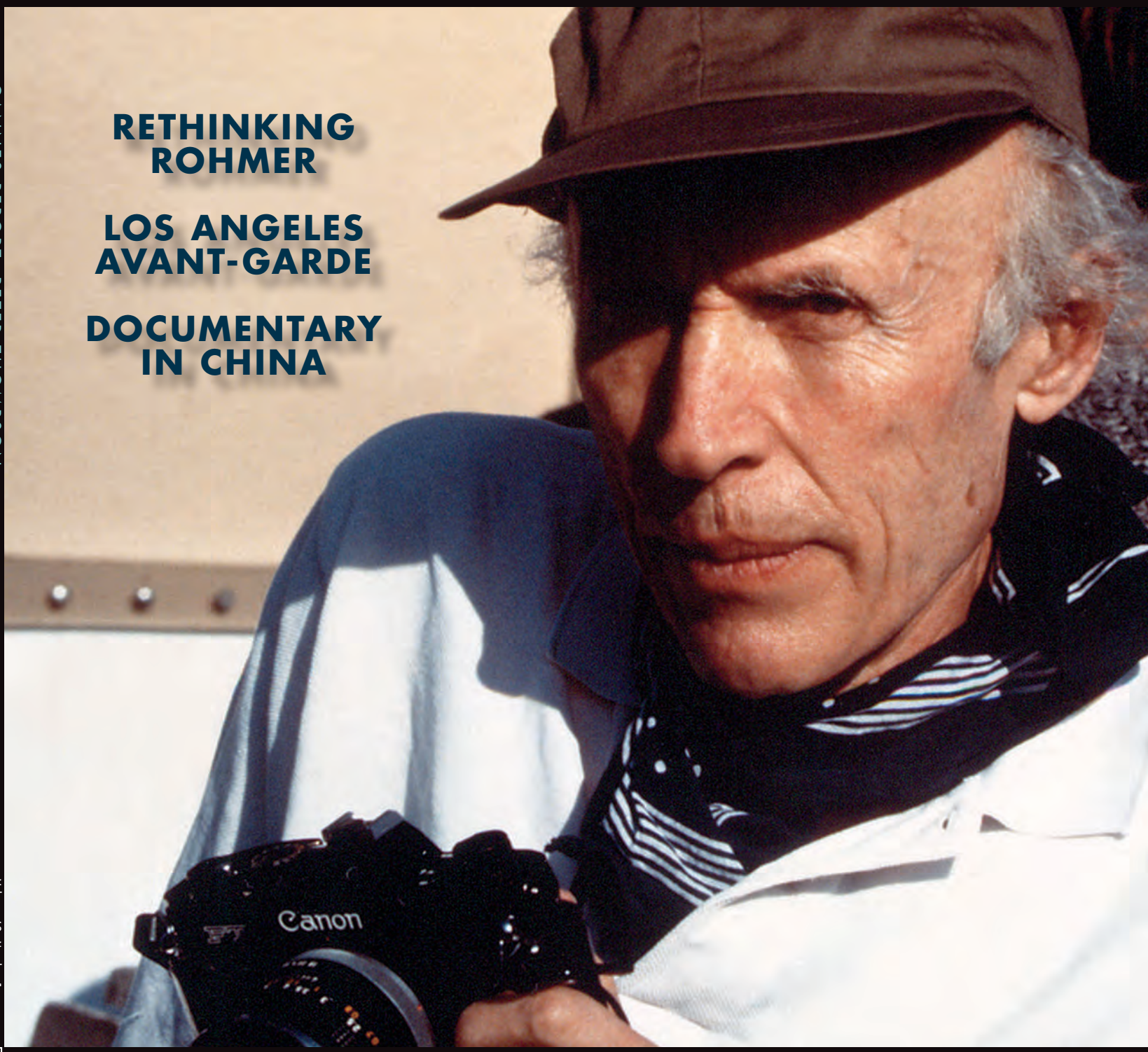

RETHINKING ROHMER

LOS ANGELES AVANT-GARDE

DOCUMENTARY IN CHINA

CANNES REPORT, PETER THOMPSON

Volume 63 Number 1

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AGAINST NATURE

Antichrist (Lars von Trier)

Eric Rohmer's films are undervalued. Certain objections recur in the sparse English-language commentary: repetitive, socially conservative, cerebral, uneventful, religiously inclined, reliant on the arcane twists and turns of well-heeled conversation, visually unimaginative. The director's own remarks compound the difficulty. Interviewed by Graham Petrie for this magazine (summer 1971), Rohmer said: "my films are more like reading than like watching a spectacle, they are made more to be read like a book than seen like something on the stage."

In their reassessment, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit do not overlook Rohmer's visuals, noticing moments which "break discourse" and leave language behind. Consider their commentary on *A Summer's Tale*. Gaspard and Margot are philosophizing during a coastal stroll. "My only problem with a group," he says, "is not how to communicate but how to be." She moves out of shot, scoffing a little. He carries on—"I'm transparent, invisible; I see others, they don't see me"—glancing up and down, hands in pockets. Rohmer splits the couple and so Gaspard's feeling of separation is visualized. Behind him the tide is low, the horizon is hazy, a gentle breeze shakes the vegetation. If this were a painting, it might be said that he stands "against" a background of ferns, sea, and sky. That is, however, an antagonistic way of describing what Bersani and Dutoit call "a moment of being with nature," in which Gaspard is "integrated, without seeming to be aware of it, into the huge seascape behind him." In a way, the shot emphasizes isolation, even ostracism. Yet it also shows that he belongs to a wider world in which language and society do not matter very much.

Rohmerian talk is often cruel. In *The Green Ray*, Delphine is mocked and cajoled. She is even castigated for reticence: "Express! We want you to express yourself!" ("I'm willing to be aggressive to help my friends," explains the speaker, Béatrice.) It is true that Delphine is rather vague. During a holiday meal, her defense of vegetarianism is shambolic and contradictory—she says lettuce is like a friend and conversely "very far removed . . . much more remote from me than meat"—and later this muddle prompts a spiteful rejoinder from a companion: "You're a plant!"

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Nature shock

The Green Ray. © 1986 Les Films du Losange. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.).

Delphine withdraws, preferring to play with the children. Later she walks alone, touching the foliage as she follows a country path. There is no speech here, though the fierce wind picks up noisily. She sat and wept after Béatrice's lecture and now she weeps again among swaying trees. Why? Perhaps she remembers the jibes. Or perhaps, indifferent as she is to discussion and debate, she peculiarly lacks the protection of language and sociability—and so cannot defend against a demonstration of what Bersani and Dutoit call, in relation to a strikingly similar event in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, "a universe that owes nothing to human talk about human feelings." We contemplate "a lostness outside of talk," like the solitude which is more benignly evident in *A Summer's Tale*. Bersani and Dutoit move past the impasse in Rohmer criticism by offering what can be called an ecological analysis, in which the way characters are visibly situated in natural environments is just as important as psychology or topics of conversation.

⁂

Conversation is crueller still in *Antichrist*. After the death of Nic, their toddler son, a therapist and his partner go to Eden, a cabin in the woods, to improvise treatment. (Man and woman are never named; they are simply "He" and "She" in the credits.) He believes they can dispel the trauma underpinning her grief through crazy, exhausting therapy involving role-playing, gnostic debate (she is a researcher into witchcraft and "gynocide"), and compulsive sex. Extreme violence ensues.

Meeting Mr. Fox

Antichrist. Courtesy of Trust Nordisk ApS. An IFC Films release.

This Eden is a grotesque kind of paradise. A clearing near the cabin looks like it has been hit by a comet; a blasted tree stump shows no signs of life. There are weird animals: a deer with a protruding stillborn baby, an eviscerated fox, an unkillable bird. Less eye-catching occurrences add to the impression of a world gone terribly wrong. As the man investigates the woman's troubling attic archive, we cut to branches breaking off a sturdy tree. The rainstorm outside cannot satisfactorily account for the fractures; it is as if some demon were protesting the intrusion. What rules this horrible place? "Nature is Satan's church," the woman murmurs. It is one of many portentous statements in *Antichrist* and, though spoken without conviction, it seems plausible. More interesting is the possibility that magic is at work—that she has actually learned witchcraft and is capable of casting an alarm-system spell on those branches.

This is, however, also a film that draws attention to its own technology. Anthony Dod Mantle's marvelous cinematography utilizes a variety of lighting effects, color palettes, and digital manipulations. *Antichrist* begins and ends in slow-motion black-and-white; sometimes the woods look like a bleached-out hell of razor wire while at others they are verdant and twinkling; videogame aesthetics vie with Old Master iconography. Changeability and artificiality define the machine-made look of the film's environment; its monsters owe their existence to CGI and animatronics ("animals in this motion picture were handled by professionals and/or computerized").

⁂

Important to *Antichrist*'s intricate, symmetrical structure is a series of encounters between the man and the marred creatures, notably the fox. The couple is walking through dense bracken. As in *A Summer's Tale*, the woman wanders offscreen. He moves toward rustling ferns and the wind gusts—as in *The Green Ray*—just before he sees the animal, which chews at its stomach wound and then . . . speaks: "Chaos reigns." It should be a horrifying moment, but at more than one screening I attended, the audience laughed, surely indicating the fundamental unscariness of anthropomorphism, even when it is accompanied by autophagia. *Antichrist* is arguably least shocking when its macabre world is humanized. (See also the woman's screaming face flashed up over blurry landscape outside a train window; the shot in which she turns green; the stump's "strange kind of personality"; his role-play as "Mr. Nature"; arms entangled with tree roots during one of the last sex scenes.)

There is one sequence, an encounter the woman has with nature, which is different. She reminisces about an earlier stay at Eden and a flashback begins: while she is making a scrapbook of witch pictures she hears crying, rushes out, discovers Nic playing happily, continues frantically to search. In close-up she looks upward and, after a tilt which masks a cut, the image is a forest panorama. The sourceless cry continues. Does all of nature now have this plaintive voice? But no: before the shot dissolves to the back of the woman's head, the crying subsides completely. Nothing now intrudes on the sight of countless, mindless trees stretching out forever under a bright sky.

Once silent, is this a tranquil or a frightening shot? And where is the wilderness supposed to be, for it is certainly not anywhere in the woman's line of sight? It is—to use Delphine's word—the most remote image in *Antichrist*. There is no visible human presence. No emotion, no language. After the enigmatic cry has ended and we can only see the forest and the sky, we are for an instant as close as we ever get, amid all the pomp and histrionics of *Antichrist*, to the intensity and strangeness of Delphine's lonely sorrow at being in a world which is radically unlike its thinking, talking inhabitants.

Rob White

THE FUTURE IN LABOR

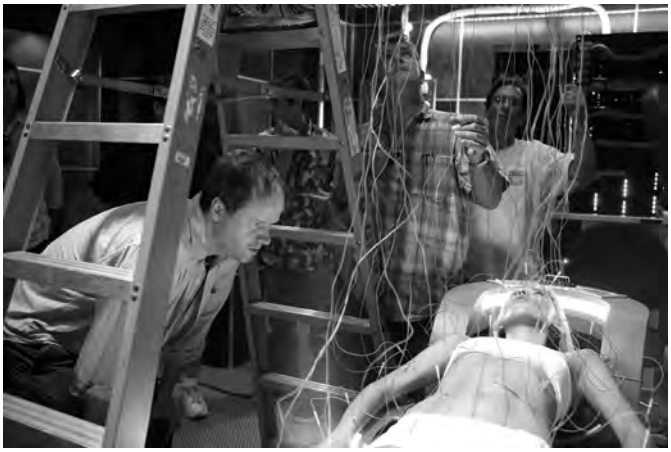
***Dollhouse* (20th Century Fox Television)**
***Moon* (Duncan Jones)**
***Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera)**
***The Girlfriend Experience* (Steven Soderbergh)**

"You know how I got the money, when I was starting out? Here. Not here, but a place like it, in the Sprawl. Joke, to start with, 'cause once they plant the cut-out chip, it seems like free money. Wake up sore, sometimes, but that's it. Renting the goods, is all. You aren't in, when it's all happening. House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for . . ."

So begins the soliloquy of Molly, highly modified professional bodyguard and central character in William Gibson's cyberpunk axiom, *Neuromancer* (sailing toward the screen in 2011, and already listing toward the shoals). Given that the 1984 novel gave the world the term "cyberspace" as well as the usage of "the matrix" that would inform the film of that title, few would have guessed that the passage above would turn out to be the most influential. But this season, at least, that seems to be the case.

It might have been the entire pitch for *Dollhouse*, which recently completed its first television season. Joss Whedon's previous creations, above all *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, were unfailingly witty. *Dollhouse*, contrarily, floats in darkness, both of tone and palette: much of the story unfolds in the eponymous Los Angeles compound, underground and underlit, where come and go beautiful ciphers, ignorant of their true beings and imprinted with alien characters, all under the watchful eyes of keepers, ruthless administrators, and goons. (When a seemingly arbitrary reference to actress/zealot Jenna Elfman intrudes, it suggests a subtext for the suspicious viewer. The show could almost be called *Scientology: Celebrity Center.*)

In the main, however, the set resembles a high-tech Zen brothel. The ciphers in question are the dolls or "actives," each named with a military call sign, though Echo (Eliza Dushku) is the show's pivot. They have given themselves over for five-year contracts they'll supposedly not recall; for the duration, they serve as human blanks. Against a considerable fee, any doll can be rented out and imprinted with memories and skills, with desires they believe to be their own. "House has software for whatever a customer wants to pay for," indeed. Like Molly, they are supposed to remember nothing.



Dormitory terrors

Top: *Dollhouse*. Photo: 20th Fox Home Entertainment. Bottom: *Moon*. © Lunar Industries Ltd. Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Echo is sometimes the hooker, but sometimes the bodyguard, and other gigs as well. The body doesn't change; capacities and sensibilities do. She is a set of affects, abilities, and knowledge, in a world of quickly shifting requirements. And this is somehow more true, more real than, say, some dude on an assembly line. Quoth the corporate boss: "Robots? Zombie slaves? They are of course quite the opposite—an active is the truest soul among us."

Echo and her cohort are the ideal workers for the era in which the prostitute is not an exception, but metaphoric representative of the labor force—the period generally deemed to have ascended around 1973, and variously de-

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Clocking on

Sleep Dealer. Courtesy of Maya Entertainment.

scribed via terms like post-industrial, post-Fordist, knowledge workers, flexible accumulation. The show finds itself rather belated: a generalized allegory of the service economy, produced just as that era arrives at its own disastrous limits. What's captured is the missing experience of that work, an absence that enables the labor to continue. For the dolls, each assignment ends with waking into the same well-appointed nightmare as if for the first time. On the clinic table, they unknowingly complete a scripted exchange with the watchful tech, in utterly blank tones: "Hello, Echo." "Did I fall asleep?" "For a little while." We see this scene over and over. It escapes the show.

Midway through the minor-key pleasure that is *Moon*, Sam Wells (Sam Rockwell) wakes from unconsciousness to the ministrations of an all-purpose caretaker computer, GERTY (voiced by Kevin Spacey). Sam is finishing out a lonely three-year contract overseeing a mining operation on the moon, requiring occasional wrangling on the lunar surface; his most recent foray has ended in disaster.

As he comes to himself, GERTY asks how he feels, if he remembers who he is, and so on. The machine's questions seem at once concerned and rote—the viewer will already be thinking of Kubrick's HAL 9000, though GERTY is a good deal less malevolent. Like Sam, he's just doing his job. Like Sam, he also has a bit of a heart.

As any *Dollhouse* watcher will suspect, it's neither the first not the last time GERTY has issued this identical sequence of inquiries in the identical tone of mechanical concern, as his charge awakens on the same clinic bed. Sam will shortly confront himself, albeit a body grievously wounded from the accident; something has gone amiss. The two Sams pursue a bitter but brief rivalry over the claim to be the real Sam, before cool reason sets in and they deduce they must both be clones. The original Sam Wells is long gone. There is no imminent trip home, no wife and child waiting. The energy-mining job is, after all, hazardous, stultifying, and demands some small amount of training. It's more cost-effective for the company to use a series of blank Sams, imprinted with the requisite memories, skills, and desires. The three-year contract will never end.

Both *Moon* and *Dollhouse* offer images of the future and a history of the present; this is science fiction's partial formula. The drama of work when it has been literally dematerialized, cracked loose from the carapace of the unique body, is entirely of the moment.

That drama animates, with greater ferocity, the uneven fires of *Sleep Dealer*: an SF film set in Mexico and mostly in Spanish. Memo (Luis Fernando Peña) lives in small village suffering under a privatized water regime (a popular theme these days; see the summer 2009 column). Mistakenly believing him a threat to the dam, a drone plane flown by a remote pilot in San Diego obliterates the family home, killing his father instead. Guilt-stricken and compelled to seek work, he heads north.

Filling in the blanks

The Girlfriend Experience. Photo: Magnolia Pictures.

There will be no crossing the border at Tijuana. Migrant labor has been entirely dematerialized; the Mexicans need not drain U.S. resources, but their labor is imported frictionlessly. Memo gets implants from a "coyotek" (the film is filled with similarly thoughtful small gestures) which allow him to be a virtual wetback, hooked into the network and operating equipment across the Rio Grande. All around Memo in the "sleep dealer" (as such factories are called), others perform similar remote services. Construction workers, nannies —each unit of work equivalent before the technical abstraction, each laborer disturbingly blank-eyed, jolted by the central computer if they slack for ten seconds. This is telecommuting with a vengeance.

Which is to say it's a more historically specific version of *The Matrix*, free of aperçus from Philosophy 101. Labor power is jacked in, tuned out, and systematically drained of its value by an invisibly remote ruling class; compelled to work to purchase stuff so it can work some more. What gives *Sleep Dealer* more purchase on our moment is the way that divergent interests of nationalism and open markets, fixed borders and mobile armies of workers, are neatly resolved technologically. This is the very nature of dystopia: the sealing over of contradictions, the infinite intensification of exploitation.

Also like *The Matrix*, the film has its heroic trio and revolutionary airs. Luz, the improbably beautiful blog-memoirist (a none-too-subtle embodiment of affective labor) first uses him for his story, but eventually falls for him, this being a movie. The pilot, a Mexican American, realizes the error of his ways and helps them strike back against the privatized and the virtual. If the film is disappointing, this is only because its victory is nostalgic. The dam destroyed, Memo and the others plant a symbolic *milpa*, community agriculture standing both for a better world and for The Real. This is common enough for science fiction, the full formula for which is too often *images of the future, history of the present, ideology of the past.*

The Girlfriend Experience is set in the excruciating present: two weeks in late 2008. Chelsea is an upscale call girl who provides exactly what the title promises: not just sex but the set of surrounding feelings and experiences. Her boyfriend Chris is a trainer who provides similarly personal service; as in *Dollhouse* and *Sleep Dealer*, the service sector isn't just for hookers anymore. Reduced to this insight, the film verges on the banal: all relationships are mercenary, etc.

At the same time, catastrophe charges the chic, minimalist recesses of the New York bistros and hotels where the actionless action occurs. Journalists, call girls, trainers, bloggers, traders all ply their hustles in the midst of an economic collapse brought on exactly because of the tottering imbalance between the service sector and productive base—they are the simultaneous subject and object of the disaster, its cause and effect. At least the film has a classical grasp of irony, which is rare enough.

That Chelsea is played by porn actress Sasha Grey, known for her "unnerving ability to look absent even (or especially) in the midst of some convoluted group penetration" (Nina Power, www.cinestatic.com/infinitethought), produces a double exposure. Chelsea is in some regard the proto-Molly: designer shades sutured to her face where Molly's optic implants will be, she plays out her temporary roles with programmed vitality admixed with an irreducible blankness. For a cut-out chip that makes it all endurable she has her numerology books and a few romantic illusions, and well-appointed digs she shares with Chris (shades of Godard's *Contempt*: no matter how much Camille and Paul think they are arguing over love and betrayal, we know the kernel is real-estate values for beautiful Roman apartments).

Sasha's and Chelsea's affectless affect, the film's thin idea—these are matched by the relentless flatness of the film's style, from the acting to the HD videography, all cool surfaces without heft. It's like a long YouTube clip. Such banality may itself be rhetorical, a way to try to understand the emotional blankness of the new life made by immaterial labor, the truth of which is not the nifty shit forthcoming in the future, but the missing experience of now. It's the world that got flat; we're just working in it. And this may be why the immanent economic catastrophe, rifted with hysteria and panic, is nonetheless the most charismatic figure in the film: a social crisis and vast destruction, at least it's a kind of change, a kind of awakening from the blankness of sleep, an awakening whose script might elude the ever-hovering technicians . . . the slightest potential for futurity.

JOSHUA CLOVER's *1989: Bob Dylan Didn't Have This to Sing About* is published this fall by University of California Press.

SURVIVING

***The Reckoning* (Pamela Yates)**
***Oblivion* (Heddy Honigmann)**
***Being Jewish in France* (Yves Jeuland)**

I didn't expect to be impressed by *The Reckoning*. To begin with, I knew a lot less than I should about its subject, the International Criminal Court of the United Nations, and was braced for too many abstract discussions and legalisms. Then the early scenes put me off with over-beautiful cinematography and frequent use of background music. But any fear of too much nicey-niceyness soon ended with a clip of then U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. John Bolton almost spitting out a diatribe against the ICC. (His calmest remark: "It will be a cold day in hell when the United States joins.")

The Bush administration, obviously fearing that it could easily become a defendant, did all it could to discourage nations from supporting the ICC, cutting off financial and military support from any of the less powerful ones that did so. Even so, the ICC at this writing has 108 members.

My other reservations also melted away. The incidental music never becomes too insistent. The beautiful photography is frequently interrupted by rough, grainy, hand-held but vivid reporters' shots of impending violence and its aftermath in such places as Uganda, Congo, and Sudan. Abstract discussions and legalisms? They scarcely seem to exist in the ICC, thanks to the almost continual activity and optimism of ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo as he plans informally with his staff or speaks with urgent eloquence (in English) to the U.N. Security Council. His leading staff—Deputy Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and Senior Trial Attorney Christine Chung (both women)—also play a large role in establishing a sense of confidence amid the unprecedented difficulties of their task.

So far, despite disrupting criminal warlords in Sudan and central Africa, Ocampo has managed to bring only one of them to court: Thomas Lubanga of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, accused of forcing children to serve as brutal fighters. The film takes us into different courtrooms where a virtually silent Lubanga hears not only the charges but also the contesting of ICC's right to bring them—as they still are being contested in reality.

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Luis Moreno-Ocampo

The Reckoning. Photo: Skylight Pictures.

Those courtroom scenes, where from hearing to hearing Lubanga's lawyers raise various kinds of delaying procedures, give some idea of what the ICC is facing. So does Ocampo's appearance before the U.N. Security Council, some of whose members would rather the ICC didn't exist. No attendees boo him, of course, but faces show patient boredom—all the more obvious because Ocampo's speech is passionate and eloquent.

The ICC's headquarters, unwanted in New York and probably in quite a few other countries, are in The Hague. They aren't lavish (but are to be improved). The film gives a sense that, despite those 108 nominal supporters in the U.N. and praise elsewhere, the ICC is fighting a lonely battle. But it also gives a sense that the prosecutors are not going to give up.

⁘

Oblivion is set in Peru, where Honigmann lived until the 1970s. She now makes her home in Amsterdam but still speaks fluent Spanish. She can speak other languages, too, as with her serviceable French in *Forever* and the English in which she answered questions about *Oblivion* over the phone. In any case, it's difficult if not impossible to think of her interviewing people on film through a translator. She's a mistress of the unexpected, with probing yet sympathetic questions. The handful of villains who appear on-screen in *Oblivion* are from news clips, not from her interviews. (Those villains are a series of Peruvian presidents who at best did nothing to help the poor and at worst gave them serious

Peruvian inequality

Oblivion. © 2008 Cobos Films. Courtesy of Icarus Films.

trouble, like current president Alan Garcia. In an earlier term he caused hyperinflation that those in power could prepare for in advance.)

The people Honigmann filmed in Lima, the Peruvian capital, are not all poor, but even those with reasonable jobs are serving the wealthy. They include Jorge Kanashiro, bartender at a restaurant pricy enough to have live dolphins on display behind glass; Luis Cerna, chief waiter at a small but elegant bar restaurant that draws customers from the nearby presidential palace; and Adolfo Chavez, waiter at a posh restaurant overlooking the coast. (Those three incidentally provide us with a few glimpses of the wealthy.) Other, more struggling workers include two craftsmen of leather goods and a maker of special clothing such as the president's formal costume. One of the leather workers, in particular, suffered badly from Garcia's hyperinflation.

Honigmann also visits Lucia Ruiz, a woman who lost her handhold on a long-term steady job at a restaurant and was promptly divorced by her husband. She now lives in her mother's small home on the outskirts of Lima, with her infant son and two dogs. It isn't clear what they're surviving on, but the small interior, warm-looking after nightfall, at least seems like a pleasant refuge.

The poorest of the poor can easily be found on Lima's streets. In recent years several million people from the rural west have surged in, making Lima equal in population to New York City. Honigmann spends considerable time at a busy divided crossroads where three small girls perform handstands and cartwheels, hoping to get a coin from a driver or two when the traffic light turns red. A talk with the girls' mother reveals that a fourth daughter was recently killed by a driver who shot a red light. She makes no complaint: that's the way life is for the very poor in Lima.

One memorable street encounter is with Henry, a youth from the rural west who works as a shoeshine boy on an imposing central square. He says that he has no dreams, either literally or for a better job, and shows no emotions of anger or bitterness. Life is simply survival. During their talk Honigmann is sitting on some stone steps while Henry is shining the shoes of a man whose head is out of frame. She takes no notice of the man and focuses completely on Henry.

That ability to focus on what's important accounts for much of the power of Honigmann's films. Some also comes from her ability to appear invisible. That can, however, be due to careful planning. I asked her how she managed to have dinner and keep filming at the busy restaurant where Adolfo Chavez works, from time to time exchanging remarks as he passed by, while no other patrons appeared to notice her. She laughed and explained that she and cinematographer Adri Schover had arrived early and set up lamps to increase the lighting. They then set themselves up at a table where they could be seen by patrons behind them but not by those in front.

That does not explain why no stranger is seen approaching or staring at Honigmann (or the camera) in any other scene. Only once, in Luis Cerna's small restaurant when empty except for one well to do customer, does anyone speak to her first.

From *Metal and Melancholy* onward Honigmann's films have been mysteries in plain sight. She seems to have no trouble finding the right people and places to include in each project, and to keep the focus on them rather than on herself.

Running just over three hours, *Being Jewish in France* (*Comme un juif en France*) is not only a vivid audiovisual history of the Jewish experience in France but also a series of personal comments by a dozen men and women. They or their forebears come from a range of backgrounds, Sephardic as well as Ashkenazi, and from secularist to deeply religious, but have all shared in that experience for good and bad. For good, in that France was the first European country to offer full citizenship to Jews; for bad, in that prejudice against them has too often erupted, reaching its deadliest point during the Pétain regime when thousands were willingly delivered to Nazi concentration camps.

In the 1950s I worked in Paris for the English edition of a French magazine. It was the successor, under a new name and entirely new management, of a magazine that had collaborated with the Germans during the war. Volumes of that magazine still existed in the archives, and it was chilling to read the transition from neutrality to complete anti-Semitism in a few issues after the fall of Paris. That was an extreme example of the kind of shift in attitude that has affected French Jews over the past 200 years.

The film's individual reminiscences and reactions of the dozen Jews are of course far more chilling. Uninterrupted by questions, they provide the film with its powerful backbone. Of the visuals, a few are misguidedly taken from fiction films, and amid the reality a clip even from Renoir's *Grand Illusion* seems off-key. Surprisingly, I found that the talking heads (uninterrupted by questions and all filmed separately against a dark background) create a cumulative power with their diverse testimonies.

While the historic visuals—largely news clips—play a welcome and necessary part, they still can't match the personal voices and expressive faces of those who have experienced the ups and (especially) downs of being Jewish in France. One striking exception is the undated filming of an old man—the only surviving Jew in his small town—as he goes alone to the abandoned synagogue.

Otherwise, talking heads carry the day. It's invidious to select any of them for mention, but eighty-one-year-old Robert Badinter, lawyer, author, former politician, and opponent of the death penalty, appears more often than anyone else, expressing his serious views with a frequent light smile. And filmmaker Marceline Loridan, widow of Joris Ivens and an Auschwitz survivor, also adds a smile to her trenchant remarks.

There are of course no smiles with reference to Pétain and the Occupation. A father still remembers having had to report to the police. He returned home with a yellow star on his jacket and felt impotence and shame when questioned by his young son. There's no need for the film to go into details of those willingly delivered by Pétain and his supporters to the Nazis.

Wartime persecution

Being Jewish in France. Photo: Film Society of Lincoln Center / National Center for Jewish Film.

Rachel Cohen, born in Marrakech, Morocco, brings up one of the distinctions within the Jewish world that could cause some internal friction. As a Sephardic Jew from North Africa, her idea of a Passover meal was far different (including exotic fruits) than she found among the Ashkenazi Jews of France. But differences within Jewry never became as threatening as differences between Jews and many non-Jews. As a simple example, Cohen mentions Sephardic complaints of shops being closed on Sunday.

The influx of French-speaking Jews from North Africa after the Algerian rising against France meant that their total number in France increased significantly—an irritant and a spur to anti-Semites. The film shows several post-World War II French leaders (including De Gaulle) making remarks that at best were not exactly friendly to Jewish citizens. (De Gaulle later tries to apologize.) That is one reason why some French Jews are still uneasy about their full acceptance in France, and recent bombing attacks on some French synagogues have added to their unease. The film's speakers, however, did not appear to share it.

Being Jewish in France was made in two parts, the second an hour longer than the first. If the first part didn't seem promising, I was prepared to leave at the intermission. That plan quickly became unnecessary.

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THE AVANT-GARDE ARCHIVE ONLINE

The Internet may have finally delivered avant-garde filmmakers the audience they always claimed they wanted. With experimentation rejected by the moving-image industry, and moving image shunned by commercial art galleries until the 1970s, film and video artists in the twentieth century relied on film festivals, grassroots film clubs, artist-run co-operatives, and art school curricula as channels of distribution. For anyone interested in avant-garde films outside the charmed circles of distribution in academia and a few metropolitan centres, it could be hard to see anything at all.

Since broadband became a domestic reality, the proliferation of moving image online, including a substantial amount of archival material, has swelled to bewildering dimensions. Even the most enthusiastic individual now has access to more than enough historical avant-garde film and video to reward their interest. For the audience, the problem now is less how to see it than where to begin, and how to organize, or even understand, it. For archives, co-ops, and filmmakers themselves, the question is whether a vast new audience for the work comes at an unacceptable cost to the integrity of the works themselves.

Imagine that you decide to educate yourself in the history of avant-garde film and video. Armed only with your home computer and broadband Internet access, you sit down to spend an afternoon watching work that you've heard of but never seen. Searching YouTube, you easily find Fernand Leger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924). It's divided into two sections, but moving from part one to part two doesn't interrupt the film for more than a couple of seconds. There's even a fairly nuanced (for YouTube) debate in the comments section about the appropriateness of the use of George Antheil's soundtrack. It's been uploaded by someone called "Andyfshito," whose other videos are a mixture of experimental films and live performances of trance music. More than 35,000 people have watched this particular upload.

Looking for more, you find the whole of Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), split into nine parts. It looks like this has been taken from a commercial release: the rights-holders might not be too happy. You also locate Norman McLaren's *Love on the Wing* (1938) on the British Film Institute's YouTube channel. The High Definition version is recommended, and pretty good it is, too: the BFI have published this as a promotion for a compilation DVD of experimental and documentary films.

Searching further afield, you find Stefan and Franciszka Themerson's *The Eye and the Ear* (1945) on Luxonline, a dedicated education resource for avant-garde film and video. Luxonline also provides plenty of biographical and background information on the artists. Back on YouTube, there is a fragment of Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963): the quality is terrible, and there's no indication that what you're watching isn't the complete film. The University of Westminster has been hard at work digitizing the Arts Council of England's collection of films, mostly documentaries on artists, but also a few experimental works. Malcolm Le Grice's *Whitchurch Down (Duration)* (1971) is among them, but it's too bad if you don't work at a British university, because although the catalogue is public, the works themselves are only available to users in the .ac.uk domain.

Moving onto video art, UbuWeb has Bill Viola's *Anthem* (1983) in its totality; the image is good, and there are some contextual notes. There's also a compilation by Pipilotti Rist (1992–2003), but other than a list of the works, there's nothing more about Rist. Tank.tv is a relative newcomer as an artists' moving-image gallery, but archives all its presentations, including a good number of works by Ken Jacobs and Ian White. Getting right up to the minute, on the Animate Projects website, you find a short by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, *Phantoms of Nabua* (2009), which is available in high quality complete with full credits, synopsis, artist's statement, production stills and sketches.

Having watched all this, hopefully you'll you've had an entertaining afternoon and learned something about the evolution of avant-garde film and video. None of what you've seen has been hard to find, but the quality of both the material and context has been highly variable. While by reputation you can trust Luxonline, YouTube doesn't even tell you when a film is incomplete (though the BFI's YouTube channel can be considered reasonably authoritative). Perhaps more importantly, you've been responsible for your own education, from early European experiments to recent global video works. Nobody has given you a list of required watching, and the works mentioned above are merely a tiny fraction of what you could have watched.

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Though the archive remains, inevitably, an incomplete and incoherent collection of fragments, the unprecedented level of availability has reconfigured these fragments. Institutional, educational, and informal channels of distribution have been replaced by commercial, public, and personal channels. To understand the effects of this, it helps to look at the platforms and means by which it has become available: for some as a deliberate and concerted effort, for others as a side effect of the larger boom in online video.

Like the rest of the Google empire, which provides aggregating and organizing functions through which advertising can be sold, YouTube itself isn't particularly interested in the nature of video content. Intellectual property rights have inevitably become an issue, but a combination of enthusiasm on the part of individuals, and the limited resources of filmmakers and their estates, means that at any given time there will be an unknowable amount of historical avant-garde material available on YouTube. At the same time archives like the BFI and the National Film Board of Canada have established partnerships with YouTube to deliver high-quality legitimate archival content. This both reduces the costs of networked distribution of the archive material, and attracts a larger audience than might otherwise be drawn through the organizations' own websites.

While YouTube suits public organizations attempting to reach new audiences, the choice of the avant-garde connoisseur has always been UbuWeb. Less user-friendly than YouTube, the film section greets you with a tightly set four-column list of over 350 artists and filmmakers in alphabetical order. Here you'll find everything from Dziga Vertov's early Russian *Kino-Eye* (1924) to Jean-Luc Godard's Dziga Vertov Group as well as Vito Acconci's discomfitingly intimate performance videos, Anthony Balch and William Burroughs's cut-up films, over forty short Fluxus films, Vicki Bennett's sound-and-vision collages, and Stan VanDerBeek's stop-motion dada funnies, accompanied by a good number of related art documentaries, audio interviews, and other sound pieces.

Concrete poet Kenneth Goldsmith began UbuWeb in 1996 as a repository for "lost" avant-garde poetic and sound works. UbuWeb's approach, summed up in the statement "if it's out of print, we feel it's fair game," has been largely welcomed for these forms. Film and video have been more problematic: the first UbuWeb film section rapidly disappeared after a slew of complaints. It reappeared, but Goldsmith and his collaborators took an aggressive approach to those who had requested removal of their work, listing them in a "hall of shame" for keeping their work out of the public domain. UbuWeb has since moderated its stance, and taken a more collaborative approach: some distributors, like Re:Voir work with UbuWeb to make clips available. Nevertheless, many traditional distributors of artists' film continue to see UbuWeb as beyond the pale. One of the issues is what counts as "in distribution": for UbuWeb, the absence of an affordable DVD or VHS is sufficient license to make the work available online; whereas to the film co-ops, 16mm print-distribution libraries not only maintain an opportunity to see the films as they were intended to be seen, but also offer financial support to the artists and filmmakers themselves through a direct share of rental profits, an already fragile business model that stands to suffer from making artists' work available online.

In summer 2009 I asked some of the traditional distributors of avant-garde film what impact online video has had on their business. Dominic Angerame, director of long-standing Bay Area film co-op Canyon Cinema welcomes the Internet as the realization of the 1960s dream of a film projector in every home. What failed to happen with 16mm and even 8mm, is now a reality for digital video: the work of film artists now reaches right into the home and classroom. However, "the threat of Ubu and YouTube to Canyon becomes when teachers of cinema ask their students to view the films being taught in the classroom on these sites," says Angerame. "It becomes a disservice to both the artist and the experimental film distributors both economically and aesthetically." Students don't see the work as it should be seen, and the artists fail to see any income from the screenings.

In the U.K., however, the presence of public funding has allowed another venerable film co-op to make its work available on its own terms. Heir to the London Film-makers' Co-op (LFMC) and London Video Arts archives, LUX embarked on an ambitious digitization project funded by lottery cash. The resulting website, Luxonline, provides access to a significant amount of digitized video including, but not limited to, the

LINKS

www.animateprojects.org
artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk
www.canyoncinema.com
expandedcinema.blogspot.com
www.luxonline.org.uk
www.mellart.com
www.re-voir.com
www.tank.tv
www.twitter.com/ubuweb
www.ubuweb.com
www.youtube.com/bfifilms
www.youtube.com/nfb

LFMC archive. Many works are represented by clips, but you can also currently see complete works by the Themersons, Guy Sherwin, and one of George Barber's Scratch Video pieces. Luxonline's ambition has been matched by changing attitudes towards making digitized works available in their entirety. "[We] started at a time when people were much more uncertain about putting work online, and we shared that uncertainty. Now we don't," LUX director Ben Cook tells me.

Animate Projects makes the most of online technology to accompany the screen-based works it commissions, with production blogs and commentaries from artists illuminating the filmmaking process. An impressive back catalogue of nearly a hundred artists with an international flavor includes Young-hae Chang, Elodie Pong, and Joji Koyama. While born-digital work presents a challenge for many traditional film archives, Animate Projects treats the web as a fully-fledged channel of distribution and begins the archiving process before the work is even complete.

LUX and Animate are exceptions; for the most part, what's online does not do justice to the source material. While the film industry's anti-piracy messages highlight the deterioration of quality in unauthorized images, its fear of file-sharing comes from the knowledge that for most feature films a single viewing in any medium is the deal done. In contrast, artists' film has more frequently been understood as experiential, and David Lynch's anti-cellphone tirade that "it's such a sadness that you think you've seen a film on your fucking telephone" (watch it on YouTube—"David Lynch on iPhone") reflects the sentiments of many filmmakers.

Nevertheless, just as the ubiquity of digital media increases the perceived value of live music and performance, so the prevalence of avant-garde moving image online returns some of the original films' aura as artistic objects—intended to be seen in a certain way, but about which we can learn through other media. Cook suggests that an online education in avant-garde film and video would be akin to "studying art history and only looking at photos of paintings"; but a realization of the role of this kind of digital surrogate might be driving a growing liberality in artists' and rights-holders' approach to allowing online versions of their work to be distributed.

With such wealth to hand, what strategies can be adopted for making sense of the archive? One answer is to curate it yourself. YouTube and UbuWeb encourage the re-embedding of videos in your own website, and some writers and critics are taking advantage. Professional art curator João Ribas's Expanded Cinema blog emphasizes "an overlooked facet of the archival function of new media" in selecting individual artists' work for re-presentation and commentary. Poet and writer Marco Milone's Mellart blog focuses on animation, presenting experimental abstract works by James Whitney and John Latham alongside newer films. Both blogs are driven by individual sensibility rather than any kind of curriculum or program, but nevertheless offer an informed narrative or sequence to follow.

This combination of diffuse presentation and personal curation is the future of the avant-garde archive. The ease of access to the Internet as a publication platform means that where possible artists, archives, and co-ops will continue to make their work available in their own context. As well as being decentralized, the avant-garde archive will certainly also remain incomplete. Large institutional film archives contain lacunae that speak of the discernment and prejudices of the collection's selectors; the distributed archive, having no remit or limit, will contain the holes of reluctance or simple forgetting. Artists who are unwilling to see their work digitized or presented through aggregators like UbuWeb may find themselves written out of future canons. "Those filmmakers who decide not to proceed in this way will risk the fate of not having the work viewed and possibly ignored by history," according to Angerame.

Digital distribution and archiving are likely to be standard for funded artists. Artists whose films don't fit this model, or who work without funding or through informal organizations, may find it harder to find a secure berth for their works. But the archive of avant-garde film and video will remain something different from its exhibition. As moving image continues to make inroads into the gallery's white cube, the conditions of its reception remain important; even the traditional black-cube film program will retain a correspondingly necessary intensity of experience. While traditional archives and co-ops try to provide reasonable access at the same time as preserving both the works and their own organizational integrity, the online archive may come to look something more like an art library: a resource for reference rather than the works themselves.

Through portals like UbuWeb, working without programs or academic curricula, the public understanding of avant-garde film may change. The pleasures of being led give way to the pleasures of leading as we share new discoveries with each other throughout the spectrum from academic blogs to Twitter, pointing out the works we love, and feel are important. Profitable opportunities for extra-institutional curation are no longer so severely limited by lack of access to material. Beyond the gallery and the screening room, the Internet is where a popular audience for experimental filmmaking has at last been found.

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LE PLAISIR: "THE MASK" AND "THE MODEL"

Max Ophuls's *Le Plaisir* (1952) has been out of circulation for much too long. It has at last reemerged on DVD, a fine release from Criterion now joining Second Sight's U.K. edition. Its appearance ends a deprivation and is an occasion of joy.

Inspired by three stories by Guy de Maupassant, *Le Plaisir* belongs to a genre that was still new in 1952. The anthology picture had been invented in 1948 in England by the producer Sydney Box of Gainsborough Pictures when *Quartet* presented a sequence of four short stories by W. Somerset Maugham. *Quartet* knew such success that it was followed, to Maugham's great profit, by *Trio* (1950) and *Encore* (1952). Elsewhere Fox assembled five tales to make up *O. Henry's Full House* (1952). Maupassant's work was so inviting that in the year of *Le Plaisir* France saw also *Trois Femmes*, a film directed by André Michel presenting "Mouche" alongside two less celebrated stories.

The portmanteau movie that juggled a number of narratives was something else. Dating back at latest to 1916, with *Intolerance*, it was neither new nor done with in 1948. *Tales of Manhattan* (1942) and *Dead of Night* (1945) were recent examples. The novelty with *Quartet* and its followers was that the common authorship of the original stories provided the one, loudly asserted, connection between self-contained dramas. The Maugham pictures all start by having the aged writer address the camera about the methods and aims of his work. As the series progressed the on-screen Maugham associated himself ever more closely with the films, speaking as one of the "we" of the production company.

André Hakim at Fox evidently wished to copy the format of *Quartet* in producing the O. Henry picture, but was faced with the unavailability of the author (d. 1910). As the next best thing, John Steinbeck was filmed in a library setting to pay tribute to a fellow storyteller and to be seen as if choosing for us five from O. Henry's 270 tales. When Steinbeck begins by declaring O. Henry "the real star of this picture" he borrows the thought from the start of *Quartet*. Claiming the status of tributes to great writers, these movies ascribe authorship to Maugham and O. Henry. In sum the Maugham trilogy credited six screenwriters and seven directors. The five segments of *O. Henry's Full House* seem to have been made by five quite distinct units.

Le Plaisir is offered differently, as "Un Film de Max Ophüls." The filmmaker's name comes before and Maupassant's after the main title. It is not "Guy de Maupassant's *Le Plaisir*," only "based on three tales by . . . ," but the writer's name comes back in surprising form when the final credit reads: "And the voice of Guy de Maupassant: Jean Servais." An iris effect darkens the screen, music ends, and from the silence speaks the soft, confiding voice. It tells of the various options that have been considered "for bringing you three of my tales" and claims to have reached the view that "it would be simplest if I tell them to you myself." This author, then, is a movie character—not the film's creator but its creation.

Speaking for the author

Top: *Quartet*. © 1948 Gainsborough Films Ltd. DVD: Network (U.K.). Bottom: *O. Henry's Full House*. © 1952 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. DVD: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

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He does not present himself as a ghost, which would be an identity of sorts, but his words are backed by the gentle strains of a harp and he does recognize his difference from us in the audience who, being alive, may have a modern disdain for his old stories. He says how much he has always liked the dark, and suggests that he might be sitting alongside us in the cinema. With this suggestion the voice makes a claim upon our talent for fantasy, placing itself as completely a figure of the imagination. Ophuls refuses the solidity that the template movies sought.† He pictures no source for the voice from the blackness. Nowhere does Servais claim the name of Maupassant, but he makes us hear an author's savoring of language and his relish for storytelling. The voice falls on our ears as the spirit of the writing, not as a phantom but as what lives on in the work of fiction after the death of its creator.

It undertakes to tell us the stories. Tell, not read. Maupassant's prose is not always the source for the words spoken or even of the thoughts expressed. A further mark of Ophuls's originality is that the texts are never presented to our eyes. Elsewhere a familiar formula served to boost the literary prestige of a movie's source: a library edition of the book, never some well-thumbed paperback, would be brought into close-up as pages turned to reveal the start of the story just before an off-screen voice pronounced the title and began reading the first lines. The black screen that follows *Le Plaisir*'s opening titles serves to put a space between our reading of the credits and the start of the narration, having us sit in the dark with nothing to look at as Servais speaks. (This effect, vital at key moments in the film, is weakened when one's eyes are engaged with subtitles. It is worth getting to know the movie well enough to do without them.)

Withholding the words on the page is a further move against solidity, implying that Maupassant's work transcends the material form of printed merchandise. That is a deeper mark of respect than the conventional tropes can yield, and it is very Max to have paid tribute with an absence rather than a flourish. Asking us to listen, only to listen, the film begins by establishing the overspoken word and the overspeaking voice as elements vital to its form. In the template movies narration is a convenience. Once it has nodded to Maugham's opening lines and done a little setting of scene or character it fades out, to return—if at all—only between sequences as an aid to continuity. *Le Plaisir* gives us Servais's voice and the narrator's words throughout, within scenes as well as between them and at the completion of each tale as well as at its start. It invites us to delight in the language of the stories no less than their invention of character and incident.

The first tale is "The Mask." At its start the scene-setting is shared between narration, image, and sound so that each element complements and punctuates the others. As the darkness of the screen gives way to the darkness of depicted night, the first image is of a word. Servais begins the description of a Montmartre dance hall and hits the word *bal*. At the same moment the camera holds its glance up to the shining letters "BAL," vertical on-screen, before dipping and drawing back to present an intricate survey of the life, human and animal, drawn up to and into the palais. The music of the dance band within, its rhythms brashly beaten out, becomes the constant background to the sounds of other comings and goings in the street. The camera discovers so much of fascination that it cannot rest for more than a few beats on any one group or action, but must keep changing the direction of its gaze and movement as it falls upon a new aspect of the human spectacle.

In these first moments the film embraces a range of relationships between literary modes of depiction and those of the cinema. As soon as we cut to the inside of the dance hall, the shots are timed to the rhythm of the narrator's account, a new image entering—young beauties, rich women of a certain age, tailcoated gallants—as each new phrase begins. A cut for each comma. Information from the camera and information from the storyteller can be brought like this into marked coincidence. But the doubling stops well short of the point where the human figures might become puppets of the description. They have not been made to show in their action the roles and purposes that the teller asserts: we see no pimping, for instance, from the men described as pimps.

The rush of activity and the surfeit of detail in the image offset the calmly itemized description and the dry delivery that asserts detachment while it hints at distaste. The speaker develops a metaphor of rainstorms and floodwaters, likening the flow of pleasure seekers into the palais to a torrent pouring through a sluice. In scripting the storyteller's role Ophuls and Jacques Natanson strategically retain prose imagery that both repeats and counterpoints the sights and sounds of the film.

They do this most expansively in the second story, "La Maison Tellier," in the passage which depicts a journey in a hay cart along country lanes by a group of prostitutes on an excursion from their small-town Normandy brothel. Ophuls's camera occupies the fixed vantage point of the narrator to show us, in time with the description, how "the cart rolled along behind the white horse . . . disappeared behind tall trees . . . reappeared beyond the foliage . . . and continued on its sunlit way." The emphatic matching here forms the ground for pronounced and repeated contrast. In the tobacco-saturated picture palace we are teased over and over with remarks on the smells of the countryside—as whole-

Le Plaisir. © 1952 Gaumont-Stera Films. DVD: Criterion Collection.

some, strong, penetrating, sweet—and a verbal rainbow plays against our monochrome image: "green pastures . . . yellow rape . . . green and gold crops, speckled with red and blue."

Through doubling and difference *Le Plaisir* becomes an essay on the shared and unique values of telling and showing. The overspeech both describes what is in plain view and incorporates what resists translation. It puts on display the peculiar ways in which language deals with time, and its subjection to sequence, as well as its freedom to articulate the invisible—meanings, thoughts, emotions, concepts. Weaving these elaborately crafted threads into the film's texture Ophuls pays homage to Maupassant and to the literary tradition that his work adorns.

All the sadder, then, that *Le Plaisir* was reviled on its French premiere as a Germanic travesty of a great national writer. André Bazin was particularly obtuse. Preferring competence to genius, he used the appearance of *Trois Femmes* as an occasion to restate his disapproval for the extravagant intricacy of Ophuls's approach. More sensitive appreciations came later, from Claude Beylie, François Truffaut, and most notably Jean-Luc Godard, who lost no occasion to laud the film and in 1963 offered an elegant rebuff to cultural chauvinism by placing *Le Plaisir* at the head of his nominations for "Best French Film since the Liberation." Ophuls himself made an answer to his critics in a letter to Jean-Jacques Gautier. This document is sadly omitted from Criterion's otherwise splendid array of extras. With its clear and impassioned unfolding of a complex design it proclaims Ophuls's pride in the film's achievement.

One aspect of his ambition is declared in the title. *Le Plaisir* uniquely announces a theme, and says that it is all one movie where *Quartet* and its fellows insist on variety rather than unity. Ophuls's three tales are "The Mask," "The Maison Tellier," and "The Model" in that order, but the titles are withheld, the better for us to receive each as a variation on the central theme—*Pleasure: Parts One, Two, and Three*. A triptych structure, defying convention, puts the longest and most fully dramatized narrative in the middle, flanked by two much slighter anecdotes, each less than twenty minutes long.

Le Plaisir's unlikely triumph is to develop a formal design that spans its three sections while realizing to the full the particularities of mood and incident that give each story its own completeness as well as its place in the triptych. The recurrence of Servais's voice throughout is a major resource brilliantly deployed. Hardly less vital are the musical themes, limited in number and not originating with the film, that weave through the tales, their repetitions sometimes startling but always eloquent. In architecture, Ophuls and his designer Jean d'Eaubonne contrived without forcing to have bridge-like structures return to govern the composition of image and action. Sets and locations allow stagings that repeatedly carry the action upward, across, and down again, providing also for a change of register with rarer but marked movements along the level.

These patterns of movement carry thematic weight and are linked to motifs in performance of running, rushing, chasing, and (by contrast) steadiness and stillness. The motif is established with the appearance of the key figure in the first story, the masked dancer at the ball (Jean Galland). He enters the image in a high-stepping run which already has a dance aspect, his momentum scarcely checked by the crowd as he hastens to the palais up the steps at its entrance, and up the stairs and across the galleries within, to descend onto the dance floor at a speed only a little broken by the shedding of his cane, scarf, and tailcoat. The camera shares in the delirium of his ungainly movement, and thereby keeps us from fixed scrutiny of his strange features until the moment when he collapses in the middle of the floor.

What a gamble it was to begin with this story, a parable of regret for lost youth and beauty—a man's lost youth and beauty, and lost prowess. Behind the mask is an old man clinging to his place in the dance, obsessively performing the remembered motions of display and seduction. It's an unlikely tale, with more than a hint of doppelgänger Gothic. Catastrophe threatens if this figure looks too much or too little like the others at the ball. Ophuls doubled the risk with the decision not to make it, as in Maupassant, a fancy-dress ball with all the dancers masked. The visual impact of the contrast he sought could have been lost in absurdity if the mask itself had let him down.

Georges Annenkov was responsible for the design of costume and make-up. If you want an easy check on the brilliance of his art, just survey the hats in any of the crowd scenes. The particular touch of genius in the construction of the mask is to have fixed a Charlie McCarthy monocle in its eye, a token of dandyism that also betrays the inhuman rigidity of its features. The skin, too, is beardlessly smooth, shining waxy. With a wiry moustache and coal-black curls, the face models that of a youth aspiring to pass for a grown-up. Double dislocation: the fake youth is also a fake adult.

The masked dancer is the pivotal figure but not the main character in the story. The active principals are the doctor (Claude Dauphin) who releases him from the disguise and the wife (Gaby Morlay) who is discovered when curiosity about the wizened creature beneath the mask pushes the medic to escort the old man back to his cramped and shabby apartment. What the doctor learns about the dancer's past as a Lothario, he learns from the wife. She is something like the

Le Plaisir. © 1952 Gaumont-Stera Films. DVD: Criterion Collection.

widow of her husband's obsession, though complicit in his masquerade. Her words tell of the misery she has endured first as the victim of his promiscuities, and lately as the witness and aide to his haunting the sites of others' pleasure. But her actions and her manner tell him something else—of a lifetime of tender and generous devotion to an object that we are not allowed to see as worthy, a life of service rewarded only if tenderness and devotion are their own rewards.

The doctor seems to see the wife's lot as preferable to the husband's; she is less driven, more clear-sighted. He laments his own enslavement to a chase that will carry him, unable to act upon the precious lesson he has been offered, back to the exertions of the palais. As the witness to a drama of betrayals and constancy the doctor here foreshadows the role of the third figure in the final tale, that of "The Model" and her artist lover.

Foreshadows but also contrasts. Ophuls always destabilizes the position of his narrator figures. The voice that has come to us from no location enters at last into the body of an elderly bystander, played by Jean Servais, a man wasted by his own cynicism. He claims to know the truth of the relationship between a married couple approaching along a windswept promenade. We do not see them, but we see that he cannot take his eyes off them. He sucks on a spit-soaked cigar and begins his account with remarks upon the folly of marriage (for a man) and the unfathomability (to all men) of the actions and motives of women. This is the introduction to a tale about a young man certain that life is unbearable without and, after less than a summer, unbearable with the woman that he has taken as his model and mistress.

The nameless "chronicler" tells how he witnessed the first meeting between the artist, Jean (Daniel Gélin) and the model Josephine (Simone Simon). On this we dissolve to a flashback in which on a sudden whim Jean quits his work and his friend to chase up a steep flight of steps (at the École des Beaux Arts) in a pursuit which is revealed to be that of a young woman, seen only distantly from below and behind. It is an image that is all about Jean's appetite and his abandonment of his friend. It does nothing to particularize the woman and her attractions.

As the tale develops the chronicler plays an active and troubling but never acknowledged part in the events that propel Josephine to disaster. She will remark that he has always loathed her, and this insight gains support from one of Ophuls's boldest devices. In something like a present-tense flashback-within-flashback, the voiceover passes to Jean as he contemplates the beauties and graces of his beloved. Matching Jean's words to a run of visual fragments—a gesture, a movement, a pose—Ophuls takes us to share a vision informed rather than blinded by desire. The words of enchantment pronounced here (over scenes unwitnessed by our witness) challenge the surrounding dry commentary on infatuation's quick decay.

At the denouement Jean has abandoned his mistress and gone back to share his crony's garret lodgings. When she bursts in upon the pair refusing to be paid off like a tart, Jean feigns to concentrate on hammering out a woodcut, defies her threat of suicide. He derides fidelity and offers a bitter parody of marriage vows by demanding to know if she intends to stick to him until he dies. Does he take his cue from his chum? He hands her over to his friend, who mocks the drama of love forsaken and strums the piano all through the final argument, beating out the themes of dance and gaiety to bolster Jean's callous challenge to the woman's pleas. The playing persists as the background to the climactic instance of the film's pattern of ascents and descents, an amazing image which shares in the momentum of Josephine's run upstairs to throw herself through a window and plunge down to crash through a glass roof below.

On the sight and sound of the crash a direct cut raps us back to the narrating present, and now we see the prospect that the chronicler was contemplating at the start. From the deserted end of the wintry beach Jean—it must be Jean, much older—is walking steadily forward, pushing his crippled wife in a wheelchair. The camera glides with them up to and past, without acknowledging, the erstwhile friend whose voice continues the attempt to account for the stupidity of Jean's marriage.

A simple shot can be just as intricately structured as a complex one. The flatness of the scene and the evenness of the camera's motion reverse the frenzy of the climb and crash. The calm horizontality of the beachscape is echoed in the camera's lateral process, but the groundedness of the action is offset by the background play of kids with kites as well as by the upright shapes of beach chairs, lamp posts, and bathing huts. These mark out the stages of the couple's direct and steady progress up to the moment when, beyond sight of the chronicler, Jean stops to remove the mantle from his own shoulders and place it protectively round those of his wife before continuing on their way. Again and finally we see what the storyteller does not. The film's variations on word and image climax here.

The chronicler's vision is of frustration and enslavement. When he recalls his own "intervention," and laments Jean's refusal to pardon it, he seems at the edge of an acknowledgment of the homosexual rivalry that is a subtext of Ophuls's but not Maupassant's treatment of the anecdote. In "The Model" the writer had the invalid chair pushed by a servant,

Le Plaisir. © 1952 Gaumont-Stera Films. DVD: Criterion Collection.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Claire Denis: 35 *Shots of Rum*

Chris Marker: A *Grin Without a Cat*

with Jean walking alongside unresponsively. The change that removed the manservant has allowed a physical connection between Jean and his wife, and created an image of the responsibility he now accepts. Then the gesture of care for Josephine's comfort, showing intuitive concern for her warmth, takes us beyond obligation into a zone of more generous feeling.

Another salient change put a thirty-year gap between the framing story and the flashback. Converting the end couple into figures of lost youth and agility heightens the correspondence between the film's first and final episodes. In "The Mask" a long marriage makes the wife the pained but loving servant of her man's obsession. In "The Model" a husband devotes himself through the years to the service of a woman he had loved and wronged. *Amour fou*? Or simply *amour*? Or something else altogether? The film leaves these questions with us. It refuses the insert shot closing in on the couple to show their faces that could so easily have resolved matters: devotion (eye contact, words, smiles) or bondage (none of those). It is Ophuls's way to create possibilities, not to close them down. Keeping his distance, he leaves it open to us to see the wife and the artist as having found rest from strenuous submission to appetite, and a measure of fulfillment in companionship.

A film organized round topics of pleasure culminates in a question about happiness. The chronicler comments acidly that Jean, his life over, has buried himself in his work and so found love, glory, and wealth. (He spares no thought for Josephine and his tongue passes over the word *love*, giving it no greater weight than fame or riches.) He asks if that doesn't mean happiness. He finishes with the now famous and almost untranslatable observation that "Le bonheur n'est pas gai." The Criterion subtitle offers "There's no joy in happiness," but that really won't do. English offers happiness as an emotion and has difficulty with the sense that the *bonheur* that matters would not be a feeling made visible by merriment, but a condition of the soul too inward for display.

That such a state of being is attainable is nowhere proclaimed. That it is imaginable is brought before us in another breathtaking gesture. As Jean's cry of horror and the sound of shattering glass put an end to the noises of strife—the tinkling piano, the hammer blows on Jean's chisel merged with the clatter of Josephine's heels on the stairs—the soundtrack is calmed and uplifted by the music with which the film began. It is an arrangement of the melody, without words, of Mozart's KV618 "Ave Verum Corpus," and it is timed to reach its completion after the fade-out on the receding image of Jean and Josephine and the bleak world that surrounds them. This music, grave and tender, brings a beauty that puts pleasure and the merely pleasurable into relief.

Mozart's is the one composition that has no point of origin within the world of the stories. It frames the whole film and it occurs at the dramatic centre of the middle episode. At the start, having made its impression, it gives way to a potpourri of the themes of song and dance that will lace through the stories. These themes can charm and seduce—tribute should be paid to Joe Hayos's fine arrangements—but they can also become insistent to the point of riot. Music can become noise. Movement, which some commentators see as an unqualified value in Ophuls's work, can become frenzy and futile agitation. The enslaved movement of exploited puppets is often put before us. In "The Mask" the energy and athleticism of the quadrille is seen behind later action to have given way to a joyless, near grotesque, routine of bobbing up and down. Josephine's leap into destruction is shared by the camera as horror, not as exhilaration.

Her paralysis at the end is a dreadful price to pay for a marriage, and it can be seen as a savage fate's extension of her role as a model—fixed in place to serve the urges of an artist's image-making. We could also share the chronicler's view that, on the man's side, a lifelong commitment is a dreadful price to pay for a brief romance, or for two broken legs. But in the first story the doctor was hoping to find with marriage a relief from the compulsions of the sex chase. And in this final one Mozart works with the calm that the image has at last discovered to indicate the possibility—not more—of a progress from servitude to service.

†Ophuls would certainly have known of, and probably seen, *Quartet* and *Trio*. He could not have seen *Full House*. As inspiration or influence are more welcome than coincidence, it is a sadness for criticism that Ophuls could not have seen *Encore*; that film's final story, like *Le Plaisir*'s, climaxes in a woman's fall from a great height, subjectively filmed. But where Simone Simon in "The Model" ends her days in a wheelchair, Glynis Johns's high-diver in "Gigolo and Gigolette" is like Ophuls's Lola Montès; she survives to jump another day.

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DVD DATA *Le Plaisir*. Director: Max Ophuls. © 1952 Gaumont-Stera Films. Publisher: Criterion Collection, 2008. $39.95, 1 disc. (U.K. publisher: Second Sight, 2006. £19.99, 1 disc.)

ROHMER'S SALON

LEO BERSANI AND ULYSSE DUTOIT EXPLORE STRANGE ENCOUNTERS AND MOMENTS OF SILENCE IN ERIC ROHMER'S CONVERSATIONAL FILMS

Is love compatible with intimacy? To ask this question is both to advertise and to challenge its apparent absurdity. After all, however difficult it may be to define love (assuming, of course, that it can be defined, that it has a reasonably reliable relational referent), everyone would agree that the word evokes a real or desired state of consummate intimacy, of an unparalleled closeness between people. To ask about love's compatibility with intimacy is therefore to question the grounds for this agreement, and, by abruptly making the connection between the two problematic, it also invites a potentially stimulating conversation about something that otherwise would appear "to go without saying." We might initiate the kind of abstract psychological debate engaged in by the refined conversationalists of seventeenth-century French salons. The question is an ideal one for an at least relatively idle elite, one that appears to have been created for that very purpose in the films of Eric Rohmer. Rohmer's work is a cinematic salon almost exclusively given over to leisurely talk about or around love. It is, moreover, an enormous salon constituted by several groups of people (some moving back and forth between groups, adopting two or three conversational perspectives), debating different aspects of the same general theme. The action in Rohmer's films, slim as it is, seems to serve the purpose of what Henry James called a "compositional convenience": it conveniently serves as the prop that diegetically inspires and nourishes the conversation.

The early *Contes moraux* "discuss" psychologically subtle yet unsuccessful attempts to initiate and to control the terms of an intimacy. What happens could be thought of as an element of the argument: the failed seductions of *My Night at Maud's* (*Ma Nuit chez Maude*, 1968), *Claire's Knee* (*Le Genou de Claire*, 1970), and *Love in the Afternoon* (*L'Amour, L'après-midi*, 1972), testify to the unpersuasiveness of the seducers' largely verbal moves. (The novelistic nature of the seductive plot of *Claire's Knee* is underlined by the importance of Aurora [Aurora Cornu], a novelist, in the elaboration of Jérôme's [Jean-Claude Brialy] designs on Laura [Béatrice Romand] and Claire [Laurence de Monoghan].) These early films are also Rohmer's most conservative working out of the debate of sentiments. In *My Night at Maud's* and in *Love in the Afternoon*, religion and conjugal fidelity win out over erotic temptation, however weak and even morally ambiguous we may find the triumphant "counter-argument." The late films formulate the problematic of love somewhat differently. Instead of testing the viability of a more or less confident erotic pursuit, what is now being cinematically debated is a claim about the very desirability of love—perhaps more exactly, about both the value and the possibility of a unique, all-absorbing, exclusive passion. Much of the appeal for Rohmer of Honoré d'Urfé's seventeenth-century pastoralized salon, *L'Astrée* (the novelistic source of his most recent film, *The Romance of Astrea and Céladon* [*Les Amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, 2006]), was undoubtedly in the opportunity offered by that novel to present, in filmic terms, a recurrent argument about courtly love, one in which we see Céladon, unflinching in his idealizing devotion to the shepherdess Astrée, defend the sublime rightness of that love against Ilas, the cynical advocate of a free-wheeling sexuality. Earlier, in the *Comédies et proverbes* of the 1980s, that debate had already taken place, in less exalted terms and in contemporary realistic settings, between Marion (Arielle Dombasle) and Henri (Féodor Atkine) in *Pauline at the Beach* (*Pauline à la plage*, 1982), as well as between Delphine (Marie Rivière) and the Swedish female tourist she meets on the beach at Biarritz in *The Green Ray* (*Le Rayon vert*, 1985).

The plotting, self-confident, generally self-deceiving men of the *Contes moraux* are replaced, in Rohmer's later work, by women who, more or less hopelessly, are waiting for the absolute love they believe in to enter their lives. For about twenty years, these women (and one young man, Gaspard [Melvil Poupaud], in *A Summer's Tale* [*Conte d'été*, 1995])

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Pauline at the Beach. © 1983 Les Films Ariane / Les Films du Losange. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.).

will dominate Rohmer's work, the principal variation among them being the degree of activity or passivity with which they pursue, or merely wait for, that love. The extent to which the active posture comes to lose out in the Rohmerian conversational confrontations about love can be measured by the caricatural nature of the one unambiguously active pursuer in the films after 1980: Sabine (Béatrice Romand) in *A Good Marriage* (*Le Beau marriage*, 1981). Sabine picks the perfect man for the perfect marriage. The chosen one, Edmond (André Dussollier), however, hardly knows Sabine; he is puzzled and annoyed by her interest, and is finally forced to tell her, in somewhat more refined language, to back off, that he has no interest in becoming her ideal mate. The other active pursuits in the later work are undertaken not by the central figures themselves, but by friends on their behalf. Lea (Sophie Renoir) in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* (*L'ami de mon amie*, 1986) sets up meetings not only between her friend Blanche (Emmanuelle Chaulet) and Alexandre (François-Eric Gendron), with whom Blanche thinks she is infatuated (and who, at the end of the film, will become Lea's lover), but also between Blanche and Fabien (Eric Viellard), her own current lover. Most notably, and, apparently less ambiguously, both Rosine (Alexia Portal) and Isabelle (Marie Rivière) in *An Autumn Tale* (*Conte d'automne*, 1997) work assiduously to provide Magali (Béatrice Romand) with the man they feel she needs. Rosine chooses her former philosophy professor (who has been her own lover), and Isabelle, without telling Magali, goes so far as to put an ad in the local newspaper for a man who might be interested in "a 45-year-old widow, fun-loving, lively, sociable," and, posing as her friend, meets the man who answers the ad. Having decided that he is a suitable partner for Magali, and still without telling Magali about her scheme, Isabelle arranges for the two to meet "accidentally" at her daughter's marriage reception.

We emphasize the prominence of the solitary, presumably unhappy, love-deprived woman in Rohmer's work because it is in centering that position in love that Rohmer brings to his cinematic salon its most original exchanges. Even more: he finds the terms in which the salon itself can be left behind, the terms, both verbal and nonverbal, that mandate the end of talk. The characters we refer to—most notably, Delphine in *The Green Ray*, Blanche in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, Gaspard in *A Summer's Tale*, and Magali in *An Autumn Tale*—provide the main occasions for talk, but they are curiously reluctant members of Rohmer's salon. Not only do they have to be argued into pursuing, or even meeting, the partner they are assumed to need; it sometimes seems that they are being coerced into even talking about their presumed needs (their friends' interest in their amorous happiness can drive them to tears). This is a perplexing development in Rohmer's work, all the more so in that these reluctant conversationalists are at the center of Rohmer's sophisticated *bavardage*. However involuntarily, they do speak about love, and their singleness becomes an urgent concern for those who are close to them. They are the final word—or perhaps we should say that they approach the silence—at the heart of Rohmerian talk.

The greatest difficulty in any discussion of Rohmer's films is that each film seems to do little more than speak about itself. Filmic material is produced by the talk that at once brings it into being and critically reflects upon it. What can *we* do—what have we done so far—other than summarize and more or less intelligently paraphrase the talk that is already a commentary on the subject that is indistinguishable

A Tale of Springtime. © 1989 Les Films du Losange/C.E.R. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

from the commentary? The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Rohmer's cinema seems to offer so little in the way of—cinema. With its interminable talk, its lengthy sequences in a single location, its spare use of background music, its relative indifference to such venerable cinematic techniques as shot/reverse shot, and the camera's apparent predilection for prolonged shots of the person being addressed rather than the (presumably more expressive) face of the person talking—given all this, we might be excused for thinking that Rohmer has chosen the wrong medium, that his work is more theatrical than cinematic. Shared meals seem to be his "solution" to the problem of making long conversations visually interesting: verbal exchanges about Pascal and Kant are enlivened by their taking place across a dinner table (eating diversifies talking . . .). In any case, rather lengthy disquisitions on Kant's synthetic *a priori* judgments and Pascal's wager are a bizarre complement to what we might think of as meager *marivaudage*. Rohmer has often been compared to Marivaux, but the deceptively superficial chatter of Marivaux's theater has a much weightier social significance than Rohmer's version of it. In *The Game of Love and Chance* (*Le Jeu de l'amour et du hazard*, 1730), Silvia and Dorante, whose fathers want them to marry but who have never met, decide, separately and by chance, to disguise themselves as their servants and to let their servants be passed off as their masters, so that they may observe each other secretly. Their scheme succeeds, but not exactly in the way they had planned. In spite of the role changes, the two real servants are drawn to each other, as are those they serve, and the play ends, happily, with each of the four coupled with his or her "right" partner. Servants and masters don't speak the same language, and the two socially superior characters, Silvia and Dorante, are put off by the coarseness of the servants' speech, which can't be hidden by their elegant dress. But it is not merely social class that is visible through language; refined speech corresponds to a refinement of being. *The Game of Love and Chance* is a theatrical act of faith in the correspondence between our inner worth and where we are situated in society. Marivaux's play, unlike the work of his near contemporary Beaumarchais (*The Barber of Seville* appeared in 1775), is a decidedly nonsubversive eighteenth-century affirmation of the identity between moral and social hierarchies; spiritual distinction is a correlative of the privileges of wealth.

If Rohmer is, as he has frequently been said to be, socially conservative, it is not because of any such belief. His *marivaudage* is limited to the purely external effects of verbal sociability; it is inherent in the verbal energy and pleasure and inevitable self-satisfaction that accompany lively, intelligent talk, whatever the subject of talk may be. We enjoy picking up and responding to the vibrations of the speech addressed to us by others; sociable conversation, however somber its subject, always includes an element of play, a shared appreciation of, and responsiveness to, the skill with which talk can be sustained and enriched. That skill is something like an impersonal supplement to whatever personal pressures are also motivating conversation. The pleasure of having exercised it may account for the surprisingly light note on which an otherwise dark Rohmerian film can end. We will be looking more closely at the lostness of Blanche in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, a lostness outside of talk. Given the linguistically untranslatable ontological distress that accounts for the film's profundity, the ending is surprisingly and amusingly frivolous. The neatness of the happy reshuffling of couples (Fabien, formerly Lea's lover, is now paired with

A GOOD MARRIAGE AND *AN AUTUMN TALE*

Top two: *A Good Marriage.* © 1981 Les Films du Losange. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.). Bottom four: *An Autumn Tale.* © 1998 Les Films du Losange/Le Sept Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

Blanche, who had thought she was in love with Alexandre, who has become Lea's lover) is both emphasized and gently ironized by the color couplings of the four characters' dress in the final scene: Fabien and Lea, now separated, are both wearing blue, while Blanche and Alexandre are dressed in green. A reminder of what was that is pleasantly dissonant with what is, with the presumably more promising coupling arrangements that conclude the film. Similarly, the last words of *A Tale of Springtime* (*Conte de printemps*, 1989), a particularly ambiguous and enigmatic film, is Natacha's (Florence Darel) cry of joy: "La vie est belle!" The lightness in both cases is at once a repudiation of a certain opaqueness inherently resistant to verbal clarifications, and an earned tribute to the ease with which the Rohmerian salon, whose sociability is threatened by that opaqueness, nonetheless sustains the transparency of its spirited talk.

Our critical salon has a wider conversational field than that of any one of Rohmer's films, and we can therefore address matters beyond the purview of a particular film. His work is most rewardingly discussed as a whole. Even a good analysis of a single film can make Rohmer seem less interesting than he is. His films, however monotonous they may seem thematically, have a cumulative discursive impact. Rohmerian talk moves toward a single complex work constituted by multiple films that dialectically reflect, produce, and complete one another. Rohmer's cinematic aesthetic presupposes (and seeks to create) an audience for this mobile filmic monument, a kind of meta-salon of critical conversation. As viewers of Rohmer's entire work, we may be impressed by the positional displacements and shifts of emphasis that relieve the thematic monotony. At the same time, however, for all its surface variety, the thematic continuity may also strike us as a serious limitation, especially since there are questions we might logically think of as central to Rohmer's subject that never come up. This curious absence or silence could be interpreted as a sign of Rohmer's inability to move beyond comparatively minor variations and to test the furthest limits of his preferred theme. Love is the absent center of Rohmer's films. Absent first of all in the sense that Rohmerian talk moves around love without taking love as its object. There is no attempt to define love or even to argue whether or not love is possible. Also, since finding someone to love and to be loved by is so important to so many of Rohmer's characters, the question of how love defines the self—the relation between love and social or private identity—might also have been raised. The closest Rohmer's films come to some sort of definition of love is the distinction summarily made in a couple of the later films between love and friendship. Love is too demanding, Léna (Aurélia Nolin) complains in *A Summer's Tale*. Once she is desired by a man, a woman can no longer trust what he says; talk, Léna asserts, becomes little more than a sexual strategy, a means for the lover both to hide where he wants to be and to help him to get there. But this is about as far as Rohmer's characters go in defining different kinds of intimacy, or in articulating the ambiguities that may lie in the very attempts to make such definitions (ambiguities associated, as in Margot's questionable insistence in *A Summer's Tale* that she wants Gaspard only as a friend, with the bad faith of desire).

Furthermore, not only does Rohmer seem uninterested in happy loving couples; he seems indifferent to any sort of couple, happy or unhappy. Except for *A Tale of Winter* (an ambiguous exception, as we shall see), the desire for love is never fulfilled. As *My Night at Maud's* and *Love in the Afternoon* suggest, marriage is a refuge, a convenient escape from the problem of love. The more or less happy couple of *Claire's Knee*—Claire and Gilles (Gérard Falconetti)—are the flattest characters in the film. Aurora and Jérôme have, we are told, found the partners they will marry, but these happy pairings are mentioned only in passing, while we—and perhaps they—are much more absorbed in the (mis) matches, the failed arrangements they enjoy plotting. The dismissal of the conjugal solution is perhaps also the final message of *An Autumn Tale*: Magali and Gérald (Alain Libolt) may be starting out on a happy adventure when (and if) they meet again at the annual wine harvesting celebration, but, instead of showing us their reunion (has Gérald even come to the party?), Rohmer ends the film with a prolonged shot of what seems to be Isabelle's melancholy expression (reflecting the discovery of her own loneliness?) as she dances with her husband.

We don't mean to be legislating the topics of conversation that Rohmer's films should have taken on. Rather, by enumerating some of these topics, as well as the questions (largely tactical) that are discussed (how best to plot a seduction, whether monogamous love or marriage is preferable to sexual freedom, whether one should actively seek out love or simply be passively available for a grand and unique passion), we wish to suggest that the way Rohmer's characters talk "around" love indicates the use of love as a pretext for centering something quite different from it. The conversation allows that something to appear, at the same time as it confirms its linguistic untranslatability. Other commentators on Rohmer's work have noted the frequent discrepancies between what his protagonists say and what we see; the seeing often gives the lie to the saying. For our part, the most noteworthy discrepancy is between the intimacy being discussed and the intimacy being shown. Talking about desire seems to awaken in the speakers a sensuality different from the happy sexual

CLAIRE'S KNEE AND *THE GREEN RAY*

Top two: *Claire's Knee.* © 1969 Les Films du Losange. DVD: Fox Lorber Video. Bottom four: *The Green Ray.* © 1986 Les Films du Losange. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.).

love they can never find. It is as if the sublimation of desire were inherent in the very talking about it. Their scenarios of awakening desire in others stimulate Aurora and Jérôme into moving closer to each other on the sofa, a closeness that facilitates the intimacy of touch. This *other* eroticism is most striking when it occurs, as it often does in Rohmer's films, between two women. Marion, affectionately probing into the younger Pauline's history of desire for boys, moves closer to Pauline in the course of their playful talk, and they end the exchange embracing each other—an embrace not at all sexually suggestive, but one that is rather the nonsexual sensuality of an affectionate, mildly teasing friendship. If talk can be a civilized detour away from the body, it also allows for a return to the body and its capacities for pleasure detached from but perhaps also nonrepressively energized by sexuality. The talking female body in Rohmer is a gently eroticized body.

The intimacy he shows us is not hiding anything; it is not a symptom of an unconfessed desire for another sort of intimacy. A sign of the happy lack of depth in this sensual closeness and touch is the entirely untroubled recognition of its appeal on the part of the female friends. It is undoubtedly a remnant of the demand inherent in sexual love that accounts for the fleeting look of distress on Rosine's face when she sees Etienne (Didier Sandre), her former lover, embrace another young woman at the marriage party in *An Autumn Tale*. In striking contrast to this is her easy acknowledgment that the principal appeal of what appears to be her tepid affair with Léo is that it has given her the opportunity to know and to get close to Magali, Léo's mother. There is nothing insincere or ambiguous about her attempt to bring Magali and Etienne together for a conventional heterosexual intimacy. What is peculiar about her (and Isabelle's) matchmaking schemes is the urgency with which they seem to feel that such an intimacy is necessary. There are very few images of sexual intimacy in Rohmer's films; the clear intimation of a pressing sexual demand in Chloé's (Zouzou) pursuit of Frédéric (Bernard Verley) in *Love in the Afternoon* is, significantly, inseparable from the representation of her unexplained psychic distress, of what she herself confesses to as her suicidal impulses. All the verbal interest in heterosexual sexual love is astonishingly irrelevant to Rohmerian intimacy; it is in his films a banal if relentless concession to a psychology of desire in which he seems largely uninterested, by which he seems even somewhat repelled.

Magali is talked into her sentimental distress. She is one of several women in Rohmer's later work whose friends never stop insisting on her need for a man. Among these figures, Magali is the best equipped to resist the pressure. In addition to her satisfying friendships, there is her work as a wine-grower. She is an artisan, proud of her product, and in her walk with Isabelle through her vineyard we see her intimate connection to the grapes, the flowers, and the earth from which they grow. The Provençal landscape prolongs the natural environment in which she herself is "planted," and, like everything else growing in that environment, she is afflicted by the smoking power stations we see in the distance. Among Rohmer's solitary women, Delphine in *The Green Ray* is the most vulnerable target of a conspiratorial interest in her amorous fulfillment. All she manages to do is to cry when her friends urge her to be more active in the pursuit of a man. *The Green Ray* is the most extreme example in Rohmer's work of the cruel irritation provoked in others by their very proximity to someone they think of as unattached. (The most ruthless advisor in the film is played by a young Béatrice Romand, who, as Magali, is on the receiving end of sentimental counsel in *An Autumn Tale*.) In *The Green Ray* and *A Summer's Tale*, the irritation takes the form of a wholly unembarrassed interrogation into the central figure's desires. In *A Summer's Tale*, the one film in which this figure is a man, Margot's conversations with Gaspard are almost entirely conducted as question-and-answer sessions; Gaspard meekly responds to her aggressive pursuit of his inner life.

An interesting form of resistance to this frequently cruel pressure is the enigmatic melancholy of Jeanne (Anne Teyssèdre) in *A Tale of Springtime*. The film is the closest Rohmer comes to formulating a homoerotic alternative to the heterosexual dilemma. There is not only Jeanne's discreetly but distinctly mannish dress and appearance. We might also say that she and Natacha pick each other up with unusual rapidity at a party; after chatting for a few minutes, Jeanne accepts Natacha's invitation to spend the night in her and her father's apartment. The friendship they immediately form is the film's most extensive and sympathetic portrait of intimacy. The film ends (as it began) with Jeanne going back to her boyfriend's apartment, apparently as unenthusiastic about being there (and about his return from a trip the next day) as she had been in the early scene. She is glumly back where she started—an ironic visual accompaniment to the invigorating passages from Beethoven's "Spring Sonata" played during these final moments, as well as to the film's last spoken words: "La vie est belle!"

It is perhaps not quite accurate to speak of Delphine, Gaspard, Jeanne, and Blanche as resisting the interrogations to which they are subjected. We may think of them as verbally harassed, but they don't flee from the questions they are asked. They continue, or try to continue, the conversation, but they haven't initiated it and they aren't comfortable with it. It is as if they had wandered into the wrong cinematic

LOVE IN THE AFTERNOON

Love in the Afternoon [*Chloe in the Afternoon*]. © 1972 Les Films du Losange. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.).

salon, as if the language they are pressured into speaking weren't theirs. There is a place in them where language has difficulty lodging itself, and Rohmer's sympathy for these verbally empty spaces perhaps expresses itself in the curiously extended silences in his work. In the Rohmerian universe of talk, we find a considerable amount of time when, in addition to the lack of background music, no one is saying anything: the minutes of silence accompanying Gaspard's arrival in a resort town in Brittany in *A Summer's Tale*, the almost identical period of silence as Jeanne goes from one apartment to another at the start of *A Tale of Springtime* (and the nonverbal, but musically accompanied, sequence at the end), the images of happy love that begin *A Tale of Winter*.

Much stranger in Rohmer's work are certain experiences that decisively determine the course of events and to which discourse is irrelevant. The major example of this sort of dissonance between speech and action—or more exactly here, between speech and desire—is in *Claire's Knee*. The film is almost entirely an experiment in psychological novelizing. Jérôme jokingly accuses Aurora of using him as a (willing) guinea pig to test the "real life" viability of a plot for her next novel. Are their scenarios of seduction based on correct readings of others' desires? Their experiment in what might be called manipulative hermeneutics is, however, unpredictably, and comically, driven off course by Jérôme's sudden, unplotted fascination with Claire—or, as the film's title properly specifies, with Claire's knee. His visual "encounter" with her knee as she stands on a ladder is the eruption, in him, of desire, a desire that has nothing to do with all the talk about desire, or, in a sense, with Claire herself. In Lacanian terms, Claire's knee is the partial object that "carries," that embodies a cause of desire alien to both persons and language. Claire's knee is the linguistically unassmilable "real" that disrupts a discursive psychology. The irrelevance of speech, and of the meanings manufactured in speech, is emphasized by Jérôme's failure to accommodate interpretive novelizing to the insistent desire from which he can't escape. More exactly, he eludes that sudden appearance of desire by devising a new plot that he will later see as having freed both himself and Claire from their mistaken choices of an object of desire. The distance between the real and his account of it is, it seems, recognized by Aurora when, in their final conversation, he gives a strenuously celebratory account of how he managed to become the controlling novelist of both his and Claire's desires. His failure—and implicitly, and more poignantly, Aurora's failure to coerce the real into her stories about it—is confirmed when, after Jérôme's departure, Aurora sees Claire going back to Gilles, untouched by what Jérôme had fooled himself into thinking of as his noble effort to save her from an unworthy object of her love.

The other major, and more complex, example of a sudden (and, in this case, traumatic) disruption of discursive and narrative logic is, in *Love in the Afternoon*, Frédéric's fleeing from Chloé at the very moment when he appears ready to join her in bed. Since first showing up in Frédéric's office, Chloé has brilliantly engineered a process of seduction about to be crowned with success in her new apartment. Lying naked in a pose reminiscent of *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) by Ingres, she smiles invitingly at Frédéric, who goes into her bathroom and begins to undress in front of the mirror. But he is immobilized by the reflection of his head wrapped in the opening of the sweater he has started to remove. It's as if he has suddenly become his own baby partially wrapped in its swaddling clothes—an image we had seen earlier in the film when his wife was lifting their new child out of its cradle. Frédéric stares silently in the mirror (at whom, at what?), pulls the sweater down again, goes silently to the door, and runs down several flights of stairs into the street.

We could of course say that the momentary identity between himself and his child brings Frédéric back to his sense of familial duty, to his love for his wife and children. This may be true, but there is more. Rohmer films Frédéric running down the stairs from above, transforming the hall and the staircase into a huge cavernous hole that becomes not only the scene of Frédéric's escape, but also a dark cave *into* which he plunges. The mirrored face framed by the half-removed sweater has not only brought him back to his conjugal conscience; it has also thrown him into a terrifying fantasmatic version of the sex Chloé had at once been offering him and disguising (or taming) by transforming herself momentarily into an immobile work of art. The flight into her sex retroactively exposes the baby's head (mirrored and remembered) as an image of frightened and frightening desire. The sudden surfacing of that desire in the form of a covered head that contains, buried within it, an infantile version of itself becomes an anxiety-drenched flight into and finally out of desire.

For *Claire's Knee* and especially for *Love in the Afternoon*, we have not hesitated to take a psychoanalytic approach which, we fully recognize, provides, on the whole, a particularly inappropriate language for a discussion of Rohmer's work. The fact that it is the most satisfactory critical approach in these instances is not meant to suggest a more general relevance of psychoanalysis to his films. These remarkable, discursively disjunctive moments in *Claire's Knee* and *Love in the Afternoon* do, however, suggest more powerfully than the silences we have referred to the distance Rohmer can, and apparently must take from his own commitment to an ultimately rational dialectic of conversation.

A SUMMER'S TALE AND *BOYFRIENDS AND GIRLFRIENDS*

Top two: *A Summer's Tale*. © 1996 Les Films du Losange/Le Sept Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.). Bottom four: *Boyfriends and Girlfriends* [*My Boyfriend's Girlfriend*]. © 1987 Les Films du Losange. DVD: Arrow Films (U.K.).

The dénouement of *Love in the Afternoon* brilliantly demonstrates the unavailability of language, in particular the distinctions inherent in its deployment, to the extraordinarily dense packaging of incongruous and contradictory elements (desire, anxiety, the anxiety of desire, the desire of and for anxiety) into a single event.

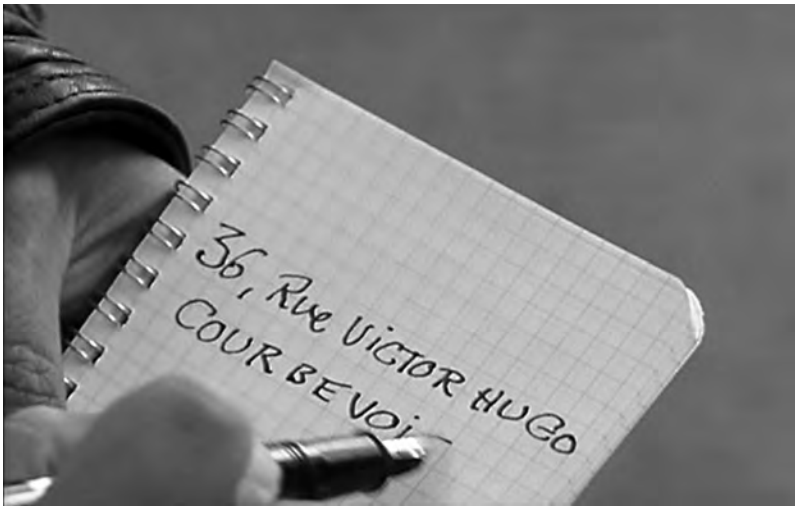
Such events break discourse. While it may surprise us to discover centers of broken discourse in Rohmer's world, his greatest originality is not the discrediting of an otherwise masterfully maintained universe of talk. The occasional periods of silence, as well as the demonstrated irrelevance of talk to the behavior of desire, almost casually clear the way for an exploration of *other* forms of contact (other than the obsessively discussed intimacy attributed to romantic love). The failures of speech do not lead to a dismissal of sociability, to, for example, a psychoanalytically motivated skepticism about the value and range of sociable exchanges with both the human and the nonhuman world. The tender eroticism inherent, for Rohmer, in female friendship is, as we have seen, an important alternative to the happy heterosexual intimacies so generously discussed and so rarely seen. There are other modes of (more radically) nondiscursive contact in Rohmer's work. Consider *The Green Ray*. The verbal persistence of others drives Delphine to her pathetic attempt to describe convincingly why she eats only vegetables and fruits to the bemused acquaintances surrounding her at a table where everyone else is eating meat—or, at the extreme, to her frequent bouts of crying. Does she cry because she has no one to spend her summer vacation with, or is it because the constant questioning about what she wants pushes her to a place within herself where there are no desires, where she is pure receptivity—receptive not only to the insensitive pressures on the part of those who are confident about their own inner density (about having desires), but also to the green ray that very rarely appears on the horizon just as the sun sets and that she sees in the film's final scene? Earlier, on the boardwalk, she had heard strangers speaking about the phenomenon of the green ray which, one of them had remarked, heightens perception. "I have nothing," Delphine had despairingly said to a friend, but her tears when she sees the green ray are perhaps tears of joy, not so much because of the gentle, sympathetic new male acquaintance sitting next to her, but rather because the "nothing" is now being experienced as the space of a wordless contact with something rare and beautiful in nature.

Analogously, in *A Summer's Tale*, Gaspard is integrated, without seeming to be aware of it, into the huge seascape behind him when he despondently confesses to Margot, "I don't exist." Like Delphine, he is reduced to nothing by someone else's relentless need to know his desires and why he doesn't pursue more actively what he (must) desire. In this extraordinary scene, Margot "corners" Gaspard into saying that he is transparent, invisible, a nothing that can't be desired, but the "corner" is the vast expanse of sea and sky that, far from erasing him, clearly outlines him as a shape that cuts into, modifies, is part of the natural landscape. The singleness of Rohmer's most original creations is their illusory separation from the spaces in which they live, spaces that can be reduced to the category of background only if we mistake the attribute of language as an ontological privileging of the human that justifies "backgrounding" the universe. The situating of an act of language is a constitutive element of the act itself. Finally, in *Boyfriends and Girlfriends*, a moment of being with nature is the source of an intense anxiety on the part of Blanche. During her walk with Fabien in the forest (a setting in sharp contrast to the few planted trees in the newly built small city where she lives), the shifting patterns of sunlight in the trees around her make her dizzy and bring her to tears. Rohmer's camera moves upward and along the masses of branches and leaves, imitating Blanche's absorbed, dazed look.

There is, then, in the eminently human, and eminently discursive, Rohmerian world a surprising range of human contacts with the nonhuman world: from Magali's artisanal relation to the earth, to Gaspard's visibility within a seascape (a visibility that belies his unhappy sense of being *in*visible), to Delphine's wonder at the rare appearance of the green ray, and, finally, to what seems to be Blanche's anguished sense of her lostness (she refers to a melancholy induced by the setting sun) or, in Heideggerian terms, her "thrownness" into a universe that owes nothing to human talk about human feelings, but is nonetheless the indifferent home where everything human takes and has its place. The characters in the early *Claire's Knee* had simply raised the question of whether the mountains in the midst of which they find themselves are crushing or cradling them—an either/or rejected by the inclusiveness of Rohmer's later images of our being-in-the-world.

And yet: is being-in-the-world itself an illusion? We will conclude with what may be Rohmer's most mysterious film, *A Tale of Winter*. Mysterious in part because the principal character, unlike the typical Rohmerian protagonist, knows from the very beginning a supremely happy love. It's true that Félicie (Charlotte Véry), like several other figures in Rohmer's work, moves restlessly among different amorous possibilities. Like Gaspard, Jeanne, Magali, and Blanche, she lets herself be carried along by others. But the film begins with a sequence of vacation scenes lived, apparently, in ideal harmony by an ideally happy couple. When they part, Félicie inexplicably gives Charles (Frédéric van den Driessche) the wrong address—or rather, she gives him the right street but

A TALE OF WINTER



A Tale of Winter. © 1991 Les Films du Losange/C.E.R. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.).

the wrong Parisian suburb. This mistake, which one of Félicie's later lovers will refer to as a "lapsus" (Félicie herself doesn't seem to know what a Freudian slip is exactly), makes it impossible for Charles to find her. It's important to recognize that nothing in the film justifies a psychoanalytic reading of her blunder. That is, nothing indicates a secret wish *not* to see Charles again and when, at the end, they meet by chance on a bus, the film ends with the unambiguously strong suggestion that they will take up where they left off and be again, this time uninterruptedly, the uniquely happy couple of Rohmer's long and varied epic of discursive adventures and experiments in love. Félicie has had Charles's child, and both have been through other affairs, but they seem to have known—as Félicie realized thanks to an epiphany she had sitting alone in church, a moment she describes as one in which she saw her own thought—where, or who, their paradise is, and that they should wait, in faith, for it to come back to them.

We use religious terms intentionally, for *A Tale of Winter* is a religious film, although what religion means here is something more complex, and less orthodox, than what it meant for the "good" (and smug) Catholic Jean-Louis (Jean-Louis Trintignant) in *My Night at Maud's*. After that experience in church, Félicie leaves the lover with whom she has come to live in Nevers and returns to Paris, where she resumes her friendship (but not her sexual relation) with her former lover, the intellectual bookstore owner Loic (Hervé Furic). She confides in Loic who, after hearing her account of the experience that has made her resolve to stay free of all entanglements on the chance that Charles will one day come back to her, tells Félicie that, without knowing their work (or even who Pascal is), she has just summarized ideas from both Pascal and Plato. Her decision to give up the chance of having other lovers in the hope (or on the bet) that she will refind her one absolutely happy love reminds Loic of the terms of Pascal's wager. Give up worldly pleasures, Pascal exhorts his libertine readers in the *Pensées*, in making a bet on God's existence. If He exists, the gain is infinite; if He doesn't, what you will have renounced would not have made you happy enough to justify choosing pleasures that are certain (but inferior) over an uncertain promise of eternal bliss. The Plato connection is more intriguing. Love for Félicie is a memory, as it is for Socrates, who argues (especially in the *Phaedrus*) that love is reminiscence. (Loic's specific reference is to the Platonic notion of knowledge as memory; reasoning is a form of recollection.) But there is of course a crucial, overlooked difference. Félicie's love for Charles belongs to her personal past; what the Socratic lover remembers is his love for a god when he was not yet in a human body, when he was pure soul in the heavens. Thus Socrates places at the very center of earthly existence—our capacity for love and knowledge—something "before experience" ("quelque chose d'antérieur à l'expérience"), and this, Loic adds, explains Plato's interest for us, his modernity.

Was Félicie's love for Charles "before experience"? The end of the film may incline us to answer affirmatively. Reunited with Charles, Félicie says, when he asks her why she's crying as they embrace, "I'm crying with joy." Their daughter, who overhears this exchange, repeats her mother's answer when Félicie's mother, a few minutes later, finds the little girl alone, and also crying. It's impossible not to think of Pascal's famous evocation of what appears to have been a moment of certainty about God's existence and His love in the fragment called *Mémorial*, "Joie, Joie, Joie, pleurs de joie." Rohmer teases us, in *A Tale of Winter*, with the suggestion that this exceptional experience of a happy, unqualified romantic love is in fact one of a transcendent love, a love outside of or before all earthly experience. That suggestion inevitably casts a shadow of unreality on the otherwise realistic (if somewhat improbable) story of *A Tale of Winter*. The story risks being erased by the very terms in which the characters talk within and about it. Rohmer hesitates between a natural alternative to the absence of love anywhere outside of a frequently enervated, even cruel discourse about love, and a leap beyond the natural in the hope (or the faith?) of a supernatural object of love. It is as if the sensual happiness of a physical, nonsexual closeness to others and to the world, the tender eroticism of connecting, with our bodies, to all that lies beyond our bodies but within a shared universe—it is as if all that risked becoming only the frightening solitude of Blanche in the forest, what may be the mysterious, overwhelming "conviction" of her body that its own life can't be "supported" by the agitated vastness around and above her. If the discursive ingenuities of the Rohmerian salon are swept away by that moment among the trees, or by the awesome appearance of the green ray, then, in response to our wordless thrownness into an alien universe, what can we lose by betting on a happiness and a love that might rescue us from the terrible mistake of being in the world?

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ABSTRACT Eric Rohmer's films are repeatedly concerned with love affairs and matchmaking schemes, and they feature social occasions during which much of the talk concerns intimacy and romance. However, according to Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, they also explore alternatives to such eroticism and such conversation—especially strange and nonsexual connections between characters and their environment.

KEYWORDS intimacy, Eric Rohmer, French cinema, *Claire's Knee, A Tale of Winter*

A HANDFUL OF WORLD: THE FILMS OF PETER THOMPSON— AN INTRODUCTION AND INTERVIEW

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM IN CONVERSATION WITH A CHICAGO-BASED FILM ESSAYIST

It would hardly be an exaggeration to call Peter Thompson the best Chicago filmmaker you never heard of. His half a dozen films, four shorts and two features, span 28 years, and their continuities and discontinuities with one another seem equally important. Pertinent to all six films are diverse aspects of Thompson's background: as a classical guitarist who studied with Andrès Segovia in Siena, as an undergraduate and graduate student in comparative literature (University of California, Irvine), as a onetime Navy photojournalist who teaches photography at Columbia College Chicago, and even as a first cousin of the special-effects pioneer Douglas Trumbull. (Full disclosure: Thompson has been a friend for almost two decades—and a neighbor for roughly half that time—but it was my enthusiasm for his first two films that initially sparked our friendship.)

His shorts come in two pairs, each one a diptych. *Two Portraits* (1982, 28 minutes) is devoted to his parents and each portrait works with a minimalist expansion of limited footage juxtaposed with off-screen voices—those of Thompson and his late father in the first part, *Anything Else*, and those of his mother reading from her diaries in the second part, *Shooting Scripts*. *Anything Else* features stop-frame images of his father in an airport, accompanied by a multifaceted verbal portrait offered by his son, then outdoors and accompanied by a recording of his parents' conversation shortly before his father's death. *Shooting Scripts* shows us nearly motionless footage of his mother asleep in a garden chair around dusk while a long shadow gradually blacks her out—until she wakes at the end and speaks in sync sound, with the sounds of the garden behind her.

Universal Hotel and *Universal Citizen* (both 1986, both 28 minutes), which overlap with one another more subtly, are personal essays, both narrated by Thompson (whose performative voice sharply reflects his musical background). In the first Thompson chronicles his research into hypothermia experiments by Dr. Sigmund Rascher at Dachau in 1942, in which Rascher used a German ex-prostitute to rewarm a Polish prisoner of war who had been nearly frozen; Thompson uses photographs of the experiment culled from archives in six countries and recounts a dream set in what he calls the Universal Hotel. The second film is a multifaceted personal travelogue bringing us to a real Universal Hotel, in Guatemala, and to the same public square in Siena that appears at the beginning of *Universal Hotel*; at the center of this film are Thompson's off-screen meetings with a Libyan Jew and former Dachau inmate who works as a smuggler in Guatemala and refuses to be photographed except at a distance.

Jno Cook's motorized slit-scan camera and tilting tripod

Photo: Jno Cook.

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Don Chabo conducts a ritual at his outside altar

El movimiento. Cinematographer: Peter Thompson.

Various kinds of reticence and indirection figure in all four shorts, which were released on a single video by Facets Video in 1987. Thompson's notes on this video allude to his "father's suicide," although the single reference to this in *Anything Else* is so oblique that it's easy to miss. Thompson's narration comes in two parts. The first part concludes, "He was once expelled from college for drinking. He never drank again or took drugs until he did both on April 1 and again on April 3, 1979, 44 years after his expulsion." The second part, heard just after the recording of his parents' strained conversation, concludes, "His ashes, weighing 4 pounds 8 ounces, were dropped into the sea off Point Lobos, California. Two weeks after his death his wife announced her second marriage. He knew this man and had exchanged Christmas cards with him each year for 41 years. At Christmas time he [i.e., Thompson's father] would say to his family, 'Don't bother with a present. I don't need anything. I don't need anything else.'" Thompson has described the main themes of *Universal Hotel* and *Universal Citizen* as "the emotional thawing of men by women, the struggle to disengage remembrance from historical anonymity, and unrecoverable loss," though nothing in *Universal Hotel* indicates that the "thawing" it's concerned with is emotional and not simply physical.

El movimiento (2003, 90 minutes), shot over almost a decade in Yucatan, is described by Thompson on his website (www.chicagomediaworks.com) as "a collaboration between a shaman [Don Chabo], an anthropologist [William F. Hanks], and a filmmaker. It is built on a deep and specialized knowledge of Mayan-Franciscan religious practices, Spanish colonial history, economic and political pressures impacting Yucatec Mayans at the end of the 20th century, the performance aspects of ritual, the uses of participatory camera, the multiple identities of a film subject, and the hopes, dramatic possibilities, and limits of intercultural understanding." To illustrate part of what's meant by "participatory camera" (as well as the relevance of Thompson's relationship to Douglas Trumbull), Thompson had special cameras designed (by Chicagoan Jno Cook) "to reflect both classical Mayan notions of cyclical time and the cyclical patterns of daily life within [Don Chabo's] household," including "a 360º rotating motorized slit-scan camera to take a 100-foot long continuous horizontal image with no frame lines on 35mm

movie film" and "a combination 180º tilting/360º rotating motorized tripod."

The recently completed *Lowlands* (2009, 51 minutes), "exploring the effects of war upon domestic and creative life," focuses largely on Catharina Bolnes, the wife and widow of Johannes Vermeer (1632–75). It's the first film by Thompson that excludes autobiography, apart from the film's framing device—Thompson's recollection of asking his mother about two seventeenth-century Dutch tiles, seen at the very beginning and then at the very end of the film, whose two painted stories embody the main themes to be explored. Among the elements the film draws on, apart from Vermeer's paintings, are: etchings by other Dutch artists "on the effects of Louis XIV's policy of rape warfare" and contemporary documentary footage accompanying Thompson's off-screen accounts of its effects in 1672; archival black-and-white photographs and black-and-white film footage taken in Delft during World War II; a deposition before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague during the trial of a Bosnian Serb in 1996; and a newly commissioned, contemporary musical score by Joseph Cancellaro to a libretto in Dutch by Thompson, based on an imagined dream of Bolnes, staged as a masque near the end of the film.

All six films are troubled and troubling meditations on history and epic efforts of research and retrieval, concerned simultaneously with the shape of entire lives and with fleeting experiences. It's also significant that dreams are often given as much attention as objective facts. In *El movimiento*, Thompson and Hanks recount their own dreams, and Don Chabo uses drawings and reenactments to convey visions and experiences that led him to become a shaman in his mid-twenties, after his family died of starvation during a locust plague. All three characters seem to periodically exchange roles, adding to the slippage between objective and subjective realities. We first encounter Don Chabo via his voice as he looks through a camera's viewfinder for the first time. He exclaims to Hanks in Mayan, "Hey, I see a little guy in there!" and Hanks responds, "That's me!" But Don Chabo is a quick learner. After performing a healing ceremony, he speaks a word in English that he's now learned from Thompson, "Cut!", and at that moment is clearly the director. Much later we learn that Hanks's role in healing a seriously ill Don Chabo led Hanks to resume the apprenticeship in healing that he'd abandoned.

Thompson also emerges clearly as a character in *Universal Citizen*, which alludes to his wife and their adopted Puerto Rican daughter in Chicago, but the things we aren't told seem just as important as the information we get. Indeed, in spite of their confessional aspects, Thompson's first five films are dominated and even structured by these absences—what might be called their secrets. We never discover the reason for his interest in filming the smuggler, nor do we learn why he's fascinated with Rascher's experiments, apart from the extratextual allusion to "emotional thawing."

Writing several years ago about *Universal Hotel*, Fred Camper noted that Thompson accompanies the still photos of the German medical experiments "with a narration so mechanical that it implies no degree of emoting could capture SS-perpetrated horrors," and it's easy to see how he could conclude that. In *Lowlands*, the disparity between the atrocities recounted by Thompson and his flat, uninflected delivery is even more pronounced. For me his methodology evokes Robert Bresson insofar as he's suppressing overt emotion to make room for other kinds of emotional expressiveness, such as rhythm and the meaning of the words. I doubt it's a coincidence that the least accessible of his films is *Shooting Scripts*, the only film in which his voice isn't heard.

The first thing we're told in *El movimiento*, quoted from a 1562 chronicle, is that the name "Yucatan"—where practically all of this film was shot—derives from the inability of the Spanish explorers and Mayan merchants to understand each other's language. When the Spaniards asked, "What is this place called?" the Mayans responded, "We do not understand your language," the short version of which is "Yucatan." As we hear this we see successive 360-degree pans around 360-degree still photographs of the Yucatan village where Don Chabo lives (the end of the last photo shows Thompson facing the camera)—implying a somewhat less skeptical view of the capacity of language, in this case film language, to communicate.

This simultaneous display of faith and lack of faith are characteristic of the film as a whole and make an interesting comparison with the dialectic implied by the beginning of *Universal Hotel* and the end of *Universal Citizen*, both of which use the same footage of a woman walking diagonally across a public square in Siena, away from the camera and out of the frame. Over the beginning of *Universal Hotel* Thompson says off-screen, "1981. I see everything from a distance from my window in the Universal Hotel." And then we hear phone calls pertaining to his research in which he speaks in English and Italian, then in French, and finally in German and English; we don't hear anything about what the woman is doing or why. Over the end of *Universal Citizen* he explains that in 1982 he bet his wife that she couldn't walk to the white fountain in the Siena square with her eyes shut. "'Oh, that's simple,' she said, 'It's right in front of me,'" he continues, while we see the same woman retreating—and straying far from the fountain. (Whether this footage was shot

Peter Thompson's parents (left) and periodic shots of Grant Park over the course of one year

Left: *Two Portraits.* Cinematographer: Peter Thompson. Right: *El movimiento.* Photographer: Brian Katz.

in 1981 or 1982 is only one minor mystery among countless others.)

What follows is an edited email exchange between myself and Thompson conducted in May 2009.

Jonathan Rosenbaum: **Fiction seems to play a steadily increasing role in your work, especially in the ways that you use your findings—a process culminating in the musical masque near the end of *Lowlands*, but also apparent in the ways that you use archival twentieth-century documentary footage and even contemporary footage to illustrate various things that happened in the seventeenth century.**

Peter Thompson: What a question guaranteed to make a documentarian squirm! Let me back into it by means of a delightful one-sentence parable by Mr. Kafka: "The world is uncommonly various; this can be verified at any time by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely." This sentence speaks of wonder, curiosity, intention, proof, judgment, humor, care, understatement, graciousness, naming, personal connection, commitment, paradox, and a child's unclouded seeing. These seem like reasonable tools with which to look at any "handful" of historical world—not always the easiest of worlds to hold, and full of shards, blanks, and various kinds of messiness.

I'm in the messy business of translating the worlds I see, along with my internal one, into form. To translate is to betray. In spite of that wriggle room for inaccuracy, I often experience shame vis-à-vis my documentary subjects. I am aware of what was simplified, reduced, or left out. On a bad day, I see my films as crime scenes. On a good day, I experience pleasure thinking about them. This see-sawing is not unique to me; it seems inherent in the documentary endeavor.

So I choose documentary subjects with reticence. *Universal Hotel*, for example, looks closely at the small world of eleven photographs and two drawings from a medical experiment in Dachau involving a German ex-prostitute and a Polish prisoner of war. The nature of this experiment could be easily sensationalized and I have no clear credentials with which to handle it: I am not German, nor Polish, nor a doctor; I was born two years after the event; and so on. I approached it only after it surfaced in my dreams, fourteen years after being introduced to it. I understood those dreams as permission to give voice to it. I understood them as a passport into an uncertain world, one that could be revoked at any time.

It requires empathy to begin to look closely at a handful of world, and you must monitor that empathy. This process is not governed by any fixed laws of logic. You're correct, Jonathan, when you characterize some results of the process as creating "fiction." The next questions to ask are, "What kind?" and "Why?" There's a marvelous little essay by Harry Berger, Jr., that I just re-read and find useful. Berger explores the tendency of renaissance consciousness to create a "heterocosm"—literally, a "different world"—in which to experiment. Renaissance writers sometimes leave a given world and generate an alternative one in which the claims of the world left behind are acknowledged or settled. That alternative world is both disjunctive and make-believe. Its separateness and limits are signaled by some original framing device showing it to be contrary to established fact. After being securely framed in that way, it then admits within its imaginary world factual elements in order for them to be amplified. The musical masque in *Lowlands* functions in this way.

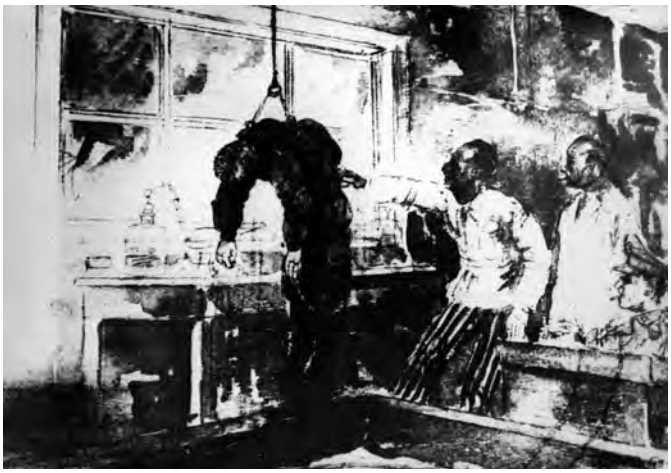
I create "safe harbors"—recognizable, explicit spaces in which my subjective experience can be acknowledged. The most overt example of this is the musical masque with which *Lowlands* culminates. It's a radical genre break from the documentary, and quite over the top in its subjectivity. But each element—including the musical carnival theme within the documentary upon which the composed music in the masque are variations—is generated from objective elements within the documentary and tied to those elements by analogy, or, as you say, "rhyme."

The issue of fiction is posed most strikingly by one especially daring "rhyme." At one point you show a Vermeer painting of Catharina and say, "This painting will later be titled by others, *Woman Weighing Gold*, but they imagine gold where there is none. The scales hold nothing but light." About ten minutes later, Witness L, during his 1996 deposition about the war crimes committed by himself and another Bosnian Serb, says, "[Dusko] Tadic ordered [the two raped girls] to beat each other over some gold"—gold that he goes on to explain was imaginary.

I included the deposition because it echoes the objective history of rape warfare through which Vermeer lived in his final years, and also because it echoes the mis-titling of Vermeer's painting. It functions to import unexpressed seventeenth-century emotion forward into the twentieth century by analogy. So too do the black-and-white photographs and black-and-white film footage taken during and after World War II that appear throughout the documentary. They function as if they were shot in the seventeenth century. Their actions are analogous to actions in the seventeenth century for which no visual record exists.

For me, this points to a certain literary aspect of your films—the way you like to use metaphors, similes, allegories, and so on, such as that funny bit about walking towards the fountain in the Siena square at the end of *Universal Citizen*.

True. Most documentarians present information in a hierarchical manner with highly regulated connections between elements. One image for this structure is a tree. I have



Brutality across the centuries

Top four: *Universal Hotel* (a part of the Dachau Museum Archives). Artist: Tauber. Bottom two: *Lowlands*.

come to greatly appreciate films that embody not only the "tree" but also the rhizome, with its surface connections, rhymes, and echoes. These two images are beautifully delineated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—but not being an academic, I'm sure that I'm misusing their notions for my own purposes.

The rhizome seems to parallel the ways in which psychological meaning develops. Mary Dougherty, my wife and a Jungian psychoanalyst, speaks about her work as making not one interpretation to link the disparate events of a life, but rather as the ongoing process of re-mapping the territory by continually linking disparate experiences. As a documentarian, that feels pretty right to me. I often experience the historical world less as a handful of objective "facts" than as a stream of analogies and rhymes unearthed and amplified while walking the dog.

In fact, dreams are recounted in most of your films, starting with *Universal Hotel*, and it's sometimes hard to determine whether these dreams are part of the research or part of the fiction. Are the ones attributed to you actual dreams, hypothetical dreams, or some combination of the two?

Documentaries, whether involving a contemporary or historical person, drag the filmmaker's being into the process. I enfold whatever I've been gifted with into it. These gifts can include dreams separated from historical consciousness by the flimsiest of veils and of relevance to the "handful of world" that I'm studying. I tend to have a few relevant dreams during the research and shooting stages (but never during the editing stage), and those included in my films are real. This holds true for two dreams by one of my collaborators on *El movimiento*, William F. Hanks (professor and chair, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley). Will tells one of those dreams on camera just after waking from it—one that embodies the complicated relationship between shaman, anthropologist, and filmmaker. During editing, I asked to include it and Will was brave enough to permit it. During the editing, I place dreams not caught on camera within their own safe harbor so viewers will not be confused by a shift from objective to subjective.

There are two additional dreams presented in *El movimiento*. Both occurred in Chicago. One is narrated by Will, one by me. The viewer hears them while experiencing the passage of time in Chicago between annual visits to Yucatan: photographs of Grant Park taken from a high-angle fixed camera making one exposure per day for one year. That structure is different from other structures in the film and feels like a safe harbor for subjectivity. *El movimiento* was shot over an eight-year period. During the second year's filming, I brought drawing paper and colored markers to Don Chabo because of the visions he had described during the first year's filming. He created wonderfully concrete drawings of his visions, his dreams, and I included them in the film. They bring inner and outer together.

One of the ways that you combine "inner" and "outer" in *Lowlands* is the way that you draw more and more attention to all the things that Vermeer's paintings exclude, such as war, disease, and, above all, financial strife, which finally overtakes Catharina Bolnes's life after her husband's death and thereby depletes all the domestic furnishings that we know from the paintings and that we tend to take for granted when we look at them. This has a polemical effect, and I wonder how much of this was intentional. At the outset, *Lowlands* reminded me of Straub-Huillet's *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* by offering a kind of materialist account of the production of art, but by the end I feel that in some ways this method and even Vermeer's art are thrown into question. By drawing our attention to everything that Vermeer chose to leave out of his paintings, you make us uncomfortably aware of everything that had to be suppressed in order for his art to function—a suppression that his widow eventually had to pay for. What are (or were) you thoughts about this? Was this a conclusion that you had at the outset, or did it derive from your research?

Before Columbia College Chicago hired me to head up an experimental media workshop, I was gallery director of the Friends of Photography. There, I had the privilege of working with three of the "Group f/64" photographers—Imogen Cunningham, Brett Weston, and Ansel Adams. They made sharply seen, clearly defined images. I was now far from California, and far from the aesthetic that I valued as a balance to my own experimental one. I grew increasingly hungry for that balance, and found myself drawn to the sharply seen, clearly defined paintings of Johannes Vermeer. They piqued my interest in his life. I remember reading the inventory of household goods made after his death and noticing a pattern: children's beds, children's chairs, and bedpans were common to every room in his house. Reseeing Vermeer's paintings with this awareness, I could now "see" the exclusion of all untidy, uncomfy, untoward domestic life; I could "see" the exclusion of his wife's fifteen pregnancies; I could "hear" past the "silence" of his privileged domestic moments. At this time, Mary and I were raising four children in a small apartment. Even with *only* six of us—not seventeen—silence was not in great abundance within our four walls. I thought, "What a feat! Where, Mr. Vermeer, might you be putting your noises, beds, chairs and bedpans?"

From wonder at his domestic exclusions, I began to wonder about others that might lie beyond Vermeer's four walls. This led to readings on the history of the Netherlands during Vermeer's lifetime, including wars visited upon his country by England, Spain and France. A total surprise. These, too, Vermeer rigorously excluded. I thought, "How utterly amazing! Where *are* you putting the war visited upon your country

A fictional dream of Catharina Bolnes

Lowlands. Photographer: Thomas Shirley.

during the last four years of your life? Where is the collapse of the art market, and the economy, and your inability to feed your family? Where is the sudden death of your only patron, Pieter van Ruijven, who commissioned half your total output? Where is Louis XIV's policy of rape warfare, the policy that drove Dutch refugees into Delft to live on the streets below the windows you paint?"

Social, psychological and domestic issues—all rigorously excluded. Vermeer also seems to have excluded himself, personally, from crucial domestic moments. He was absent from a legal deposition at which all other adults in the family—his wife, mother-in-law, maid, and two pigment grinders—testified against his wife's brother for attacking her with an iron pin affixed to a stick when Catharina was "pregnant to the last degree." I then read two wonderful articles by Harry Berger, Jr., and Lawrence Weschler, each of which explores the notion of Vermeer's avoided issues from different perspectives. In Weschler's *New Yorker* essay, "Inventing Peace," he writes that Vermeer so overtly excluded war from his paintings that they paradoxically embody the very notion of "peace." Weschler saw an early edit of *Lowlands*. His feedback on this issue was invaluable. As I continued to edit the documentary parts of the film, Vermeer's wife steadily emerged out of her "exclusion" to become the hero of it—its actual, true subject—as she was the actual, true hero of her family. Upon her husband's death in 1675, it was Catharina who was left with no income and ten minor children; it was she who fought to save Vermeer's paintings from creditors by declaring bankruptcy. My gradual awareness of her importance emerged over 182 versions of the script (that's one of the compensations of having a day job—you can better afford to support slow realizations). By the time I was ready to shoot the masque, Catharina was solidly in the driver's seat.

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ABSTRACT Chicago-based essay filmmaker Peter Thompson's filmography to date comprises *Two Portraits* (1982), *Universal Hotel* and *Universal Citizen* (both 1986), *El movimiento* (2003), and *Lowlands* (2009)—which, as Jonathan Rosenbaum discusses, treat subjects ranging from Nazi rewarming experiments, Yucatan, and Vermeer's wife Catharina Bolnes.

KEYWORDS documentary, essay film, Peter Thompson, *El movimiento, Lowlands*

IMAMURA REVISITED

DONALD RICHIE EXPLORES A TEEMING, VIOLENT, AND PROFANE VISION OF UNOFFICIAL JAPAN

The Japanese film director Shohei Imamura (1926–2006) once told the critic Heiichi Sugiyama that he wanted to make "really human, Japanese, unsettling films," implying that the well-made, plotted, reconciling Japanese film is not really Japanese. Later he further defined this goal, telling director–producer Alan Poul: "I want to make messy films."

Messy might mean untidy, difficult, even dirty, but it certainly means the opposite of neat, easy, clean, and indicates the way in which Imamura viewed the world that shaped his work, and how he saw himself as opposed to other directors of his generation. In reference to his contemporary, Nagisa Oshima, he once said: "I am a country farmer; Oshima is a samurai."

The implication is that he himself belonged to those rural/proletariat substrata that he most often made his films about. Oshima, however, was a politically active aristocratic intellectual, a graduate of Kyoto University who, though he too sometimes concerned himself with various untidy minorities within Japan, was not of their class.

Neither, of course, was Imamura. Son of a physician, he was intended for the elite and would have graduated from the University of Tokyo had he not left the presented path and ventured into theater and eventually into film. Though he never explained why this occurred, one reason might have been that he looked around and made up his mind about the nature of the Japan in which he lived.

THE TWO JAPANS

There are actually two Japans. One is the "official" version, the aesthetically pleasing world of the tea ceremony, of subservient and kimono-clad women, and of such approved values as fidelity and loyalty. This is the country shown the foreign visitor and this is the way that Japan likes to see itself—whether or not it happens to be like this.

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The other Japan could—judging from Imamura's films—be called the "real" version. His people, as has been often noted, do not behave like "Japanese" because none of the official rules of order and decorum apply. These folks do not know the meaning of fidelity or loyalty: they are natural and are, to that extent, uncivilized if civilization means a departure from the natural. They are selfish, amoral, pragmatic, and all the vitality of Japan comes from their numbers.

There is a passage illustrating this in *Pigs and Battleships* (1961), the first really Imamura-like Imamura film. After an appalling family fight the kids go back to their homework. One of them reads from the schoolbook: "Japan is a beautiful country with a unique culture able to incorporate the finer practices and customs of other countries." As we look at the children and listen to this description of official Japan we remember the hair-pulling, the knocking down, the shouts and screams.

Then the scene changes but the child's voiceover continues. We are looking at a passel of pigs, bound and roped, on their way to market and hearing: "Japan has become a modern, independent state at an astonishing pace." Cut to the seedy gang boys planning the pig caper and hearing: "However, many old ways of thinking persist, and there is still much poverty."

A major Imamura thesis it that the official version has long tried to obscure the real Japan. The common folk have suffered a long history of repression, enduring one of the longest-lasting police states—the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) with its samurai, its self-effacing women, and its vainglory. For whole centuries officials have attempted to repress the most reprehensible but also the most natural instincts of the people.

Judging from his films, Imamura early saw that the official version was a lie and the real version the truth. Perhaps this led him to join those far down the social scale (actors still among them) for whom official Japan has no social use. Here, among these people (and others—prostitutes, pimps,

Survival of the fittest

Top four: *Pigs and Battleships.* © 1961 Nikkatsu Corporation. DVD: Criterion Collection. Next two: *Intentions of Murder.* © 1964 Nikkatsu Corporation. DVD: Criterion Collection.
Bottom two: *The Insect Woman.* © 1963 Nikkatsu Corporation. DVD: Criterion Collection.

gangsters, and whatever proletariat is left) to whom polite Japanese society offers no social role, Imamura may have felt that he had finally apprehended reality.

Take, for example, Japanese women. They are in actuality far different from those portrayed in the official version. Those make-believe women accept the myth of the long-suffering creature, an obedient, self-demeaning person, caught in her own culture and denied a number of the rights elsewhere considered basic.

Women are not at like this, Imamura once told critic Audie Bock. "Self-sacrificing women like the heroines of Naruse and Mizoguchi don't really exist . . . My heroines are true to life—just look around you at Japanese women." Early in his career Imamura decided to portray women as they really were and three of these films—*Pigs and Battleships*, *The Insect Woman* (1963), and *Intentions of Murder* (1964)—have recently been issued on DVD by the Criterion Collection.

The Imamura woman received her first full-length portrait in *Pigs and Battleships* where the Jitsuko Yoshimura character, a strong young person, cannot protect her virginity but closely guards her determination as she scrambles out of her awful life and into something better. The housewife (Masumi Harukawa) in *Intentions of Murder* outlives her rapist, legalizes her son, and triumphantly comes into her own in a man's world. Initially raped, her first reaction is that of the official proper Japanese girl—she ought to commit suicide. What she actually does, however, is to open the icebox and eat a big meal.

The heroine (Sachiko Hidari) of *The Insect Woman* is equally determined, much like the beetle shown in the first shot of the film. In the final sequence she wants (as it had) to get up a hill. Various things occur (she dirties her stockings, she breaks her clogs—occurrences that would reduce a Naruse heroine to tears), but she successfully struggles on.

She bases her business (prostitution) upon the same considerations as do respectable Japanese business firms, with the difference that she is, by comparison, the more open and honest. Like the pornographer in *The Pornographers* (1966) she believes that she is fulfilling a civic function through her work, that her products are necessary to the nation's well-being. She is, of course, right. It is the official view ("Japan has no pornography") that is wrong.

Imamura once described the real Japanese woman he intended to portray. "Medium height and weight, light coloring, smooth skin. Maternal . . . good genitals. Juicy." The sexual emphasis is strong. Her genitals are in good working order (juicy) and at the same time she is described as maternal.

Most men do not make this connection between good juicy genitals and mother. Mother is sacred and mother's vagina is not an object upon which many men dwell. To mother herself, however, her vagina is an important part of her body.

A woman's sexuality is important to her because sexuality is basic to being human. Men may and do attempt to deny this but women (particularly Imamura's women) would never subscribe to anything this narrow. Their natural world is amoral and the most fit survive.

Perhaps consequently Imamura's films include more scenes of sexual intercourse than do many Japanese films. Given his idea of women, one might think he would show them as being sexually aggressive, manipulating men. Actually, however, they initially seem manipulated.

Often they are taken from behind, that position least supportive of a woman's dignity. In *The Insect Woman* there is a scene where the heroine's daughter is thus entered by her mother's boyfriend: she is bent over, skirt raised, wheeled into position. Out of context such scenes might be from any one of Japan's many softcore porno films, all of which enthusiastically specialize in the degradation of women.

Any such manipulation, however, is merely apparent. Something usually happens to mar the pleasure of the women's partners. In *Vengeance Is Mine* (1979), the man develops a sudden cramp in his foot which he must massage as he goes on as best he can; in *The Insect Woman*, he in his transports loses his false teeth.

The inference is that in such a natural situation it is only the female who, despite her undignified position, enjoys herself. Further, any dignity or lack of it is far from her thoughts. Sex and its various positions are natural to her—natural to us all, would but men realized it.

Indications of the importance of love to women are certainly not lacking in the movies, but here the difference is that Imamura approves of it. In films of other directors scenes of a similar import (including that Japanese porn favorite: women obsessed, groveling and whimpering, while her partner, a dedicated craftsman, continues cool and collected above her), indicate the director's disapproval as well as his prurience. In the films of Imamura the woman's acceptance of the sexual basis of most things finds the director agreeing.

SEX EXTENDED

Imamura told critic Koichi Yamada that he was most interested "in the relationship of the lower part of the human body and the lower part of the social structure" because this is where "the reality of daily Japanese life supports itself." Just as the genitals are the basis of the person, so the "lower classes" are the makers of the nation. And, as the genitals and their functions are hidden, so are these classes of society ignored.

Intricacy of framing and montage

The Insect Woman. © 1963 Nikkatsu Corporation. DVD: Criterion Collection.

Cable-car epiphany

Vengeance Is Mine. © 1979 Shochiku Co. Ltd. DVD: Criterion Collection.

This is true everywhere but it is particularly true in Japan, a country more openly hypocritical than most. Imamura, talking with Audie Bock, pointed out that a nearby skyscraper had on its roof an old Shinto shrine. "You may think," he said, indicating the skyline, "that all this is real, but to me it is illusion. The reality is these little shrines, the superstition and irrationality that pervade Japan under this veneer of advanced technology and business suits."

Imamura's people inhabit a world so filled with vitality that their energy is visible—everything in the scene (and outside it) belongs to them. The Imamura view is packed with movement, the screen is so full that parts of the people are cut off. This exclusion of part (tops of heads, sides of bodies) is important. It implies a burgeoning, something growing outside what the director is showing.

Another way in which this is suggested is Imamura's creating other planes within this frame. In the sukiyaki restaurant sequence in *The Insect Woman* there are three levels of diners, only one of which has dialogue. These extend out of the scene and we must search to find the couple requiring our attention. Such inconvenience to an audience has the effect of making us move closer. It creates a kind of intimacy, this mesh of movement through which things must be viewed.

Often movement occurs even when it has no plot value—though it has, of course, enormous atmospheric value. In *The Insect Woman*, during the wake sequence the foreground is occupied by the extras and their enormous rosary. All dialogue, however, is contained in the top of the screen, a row far in back occupied by the nearly invisible principals. The ritual grinds on, meaninglessly, undercut by the profane dialogue, the entire mise-en-scène thrown away, as it were, in the interests of bringing us closer, making certain we spot the source, find an authenticity amid all this movement.

If Imamura's space is crammed with action, his time is also jammed with events. In *The Insect Woman* a single multi-level, multi-action composition occurs again and again. This is the farmhouse interior: the family is on the right, balanced by an open door on the left. This, in turn, gives on another

room, in which there is another door. Further away is yet another door. Various actions occur on right and left, far and close, all at the same time, and multiple actions collapse space at the same time that they telescope time.

Imamura also collapses time through editing. In *The Insect Woman* whole weeks are put into three cuts: a child whom the heroine is supposed to be watching pulls the hot soup cauldron off the stove, cut to a detail of the child's body, cut to the heroine—but now she is in one of the new-religion centers and weeks have passed.

Or, in order to suggest a teeming, burgeoning world, Imamura will enlarge the screen by suggesting unseen extensions and implying a hidden wholeness. This often consists of the sudden intrusion of something unexpected. In *The Insect Woman* the heroine is walking with her daughter, and the slow pan reveals strange, unrecognizable shapes in the background. It is only as the scene progresses that we see that they are walking past lines of American bombers at a local U.S. Air Force base. Japan is still occupied—reasons for the success of our heroine are suggested.

One of the most spectacular of these small epiphanies occurs in *Vengeance Is Mine*. Father and wife are in a cable car going to a mountaintop to scatter the ashes of their criminal son and husband. Suddenly through the window we witness an apparition, a square of women in white robes, standing, looking at us and rapidly descending. It is, of course, the other cable car—one goes down as the other goes up—and these are female pilgrims, standing because there are no more seats.

This we understand but the effect is extraordinary. We know the antihero is dead, we know they are taking the ashes somewhere—and, suddenly, Buddhist angels. A hidden wholeness reveals itself and at the same time prepares us for the final sequence which is, frankly, supernatural. Such inexplicable scenes are as full as the famous vase at the end of Ozu's *Late Spring* (1949). Both scenes are, in a way, containers—holders for something something necessary and unexpected.

WHAT IS TRUTH?

Though the director spoke of his ambitions toward messy films, it is clear that such seeming spontaneity was the result of much planning. Like those directors under whom he trained as assistant (Yasujiro Ozu and Yuzo Kawashima) he once said that (dividing the film process into scenario, shooting, and editing) he worked hardest on the script.

Once it was finished to his liking it became the blueprint for the film— for Imamura no less than for Ozu. Asked how much he departed while shooting from what he had written, he said very little, maybe three percent. "This means that ninety-seven percent of the film is just as I wrote it."

The result is often something nearer an essay than a plot-driven entertainment, closer to something you might even call a laboratory report, something that critics have called Imamura's "documentary approach." In *The Insect Woman* (the Japanese title properly translates as *Japanese Entomology*) we are offered no plot at all, only patterns, a series of scenes (specimen slides we might call them) from the life we are studying. The subtitle of *The Pornographers* is *An Introduction to Anthropology*.

Imamura once said that he did this because he wanted to make the viewer critical of the film. That was also why he used distancing devices (freeze-frames, long-distance lenses, etc.), refused himself the consolations of plot, and seemed to imply that this was not a fiction film but actual life as observed.

"Mr. Director, what is truth?" asks the woman in *A Man Vanishes* (1967). The line is spoken just before the climactic scene and is just as much a statement of purpose as it is a cue-line for the spectacle to come. It is also a question the implications of which reverberate through all of Imamura's films. One of his major themes is precisely this confrontation of illusion with reality (and the resultant difficulty in deciding which is which).

An initial decision is Japan, the official version, is not real, not true. The little shrine is more real than the dead skyscraper. Here lies his celebrated break with his mentor, Yasujiro Ozu. Assistant on *Tokyo Story* (1953) and several other pictures Imamura came to dislike what he saw as Ozu's celebration of a false official version—the serene world of Japanese aesthetics.

Toward the end of his life, however, Imamura said that such antagonism now seemed strange to him. The older director was perfectly aware of the real under the official and this is, indeed, what his pictures are ultimately about. The younger assistant resented what he thought was the elder's lack of concern for reality. But we can now see that Ozu and Imamura are very alike. Though their style and technique could not more differ (neat vs. messy), their concern for the natural, for the real, for the truth, is identical—with the difference that while Ozu sees the truth and beauty of the real being slowly eroded, Imamura sees it as healthy, alive, and vital as ever.

DONALD RICHIE is a former curator of film at the New York Museum of Modern Art and arts critic for the *Japan Times*.

ABSTRACT A review essay of a boxed set of films by Shohei Imamura—*Pigs and Battleships* (1961), *The Insect Woman* (1963), *Intentions of Murder* (1964)—exploring the Japanese director's teeming, demystifying view of social convention, women, and sex.

DVD DATA *Pigs, Pimps and Prostitutes: 3 Films by Shohei Imamura*. Director: Shohei Imamura. © 1961, 1963, 1964 Nikkatsu Corporation. Publisher: Criterion Collection, 2009. $79.95, 3 discs.

BULLDOZERS, BIBLES, AND VERY SHARP KNIVES: THE CHINESE INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY SCENE

ABÉ MARK NORNES REPORTS FROM THE THRIVING FESTIVALS IN KUNMING AND SONGHZUANG, CHINA

There are three inevitabilities in Chinese independent documentary: demolition, Christianity, and the slaughter of animals great and small. This is only a slight exaggeration. One tends to watch a given film from here waiting for the appearance of crosses and bulldozers, and when animals are led on-stage one prepares for the worst. All three point to the massive flux Chinese society is undergoing. For example, the country is one astoundingly large construction zone; the bulldozers plough down ancient neighborhoods and displace the neighbors to make way for that modern architectural sheen China shows off to the world. The films' Christians, usually from the hinterlands, are locked in constant negotiation with bureaucrats over ways of life (and thus over souls as well); filmmakers deploy their crosses as signs of hope. And as for the sacrifice of animals, this violence aimed at everything from oxen to sparrows points to the matter-of-fact brutality of life in the margins of modernity.

This is a China one will not find on television, and that is precisely the point. A truly independent documentary movement has taken that familiar waveform marked by explosive growth, newness everywhere, and exhilaration over innovative moviemaking and ways of viewing. Twenty-five years ago, I saw my first Chinese documentary, a mind-numbing propaganda piece on irrigation projected in a dreary movie palace in Shanghai. This is the kind of cinema—along with its broadcast television analogue—that the new documentary rebels against.

Most independent films utilize a variation of direct cinema originally learned from Fredrick Wiseman. The other name regularly dropped is Japan's Ogawa Shinsuke, whose long-term study of oppressed peasants informs documentaries about land-expropriation protests. The Chinese discovered Ogawa at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, when successive waves of directors visited in the 1990s. I was working as a programmer at Yamagata throughout this period, and we marveled as the Chinese contingent at the festival grew and grew. Their films increased in number and quality every year until directors like Wang Bing, Feng Yan, and Li Yifan began taking the top prizes at the festival. Since 2000, this energetic growth has taken the proportions of a movement.

A complex of factors has made this development possible, starting with technology. The indies emerged in the late 1980s with the price drop in video camcorders, but it was DV that made all the difference. High-quality capture came into the price range of a rising middle class that could afford cameras and a computer. The camcorders and non-linear editing software automated things to the point that anyone could make movies; most of the filmmakers are poets, painters, novelists, and still photographers, and they shoot without light packages or crews. Using a fairly unprocessed version of direct cinema, they address the spectrum of life the government usually stakes off as taboo: prostitution, bureaucratic corruption, rural protests against land expropriation, the impoverished elderly and mentally handicapped, a compromised education system, religious fervor, homosexuality, and just sexuality period.

Needless to say, this doesn't square with one's image of Chinese image culture. However, these kinds of transformations in style and subject matter should come as no surprise to those familiar with the history of documentary. Filmmakers take every inch they can get. It's the reception context that is truly extraordinary. And the situation can be encapsulated in the example of two festivals: the Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival (or Yunfest, as it is known) and the China Documentary Film Festival in Songzhuang.

The documentary scene hatched in cafés and university-based cine-clubs, and after the turn of the century a wide variety of festivals cropped up across the country in cities like

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Inaugural film exhibit, Iberia Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing

Photo: Xueyin. Courtesy of CIFA.

Shanghai and Nanjing. There is a single "international festival" in Guangzhou, but as an officially recognized event it is fatally compromised in the eyes of the independents (none of their work could ever pass the censorship Guangzhou entrants must submit to). Yunfest and Songzhuang have achieved their positions of prestige through their uncompromising commitment to independence.

This also makes them thoroughly national affairs. Where the international festival is an interface of the local and global, these events are firmly planted at the heterogeneous nexus of the national. The catalogues are bilingual, but foreign subtitles are often squeezed out by the Chinese subs made necessary by dialects. Interpretation for Q&A sessions is generally the whispering-of-friends variety. And while the films testify to China's astounding cultural and linguistic differences, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora are all but excluded from the films and their discussions. There is a lot of navel-gazing here—granted, the concentration is wholly on poking at the dirt inside. This sense of the documentary world being hermetically sealed by the national border is part of what makes today's scene so fascinating. No doubt it will completely transform in the coming years.

The heterogeneity of the national space is particularly palpable at the biennial Yunfest, which just finished its fourth edition in March 2009. Located in Kunming, far from the bustle of the capital, this friendly and relaxed festival is run, curiously enough, by scholars from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, with sponsorship from NGOs like the Ford Foundation, Toyota Foundation, and Oxfam. It's basically a do-it-yourself affair held in the prefectural library. That one can run one of the most important festivals in the country with projectors placed on tables says a lot about the heady flux of the present moment.

Yunfest is split between a competition and a program on "community video." The organizers are visual anthropologists by trade and seem ambivalent about holding a competition. However, it does perform the usual functions: call attention to the festival, direct cash to worthy (and quite poor) filmmakers, push future production in interesting directions, and introduce key foreign film people to the local

documentary scene by making them jurors. Indeed, this is how I came to write this article.

The competition also provides the occasion for controversy, without which no film festival is complete. This year's object of debate was Xu Tong's *Wheat Harvest*, China's first prostitution documentary. It is a remarkably intimate portrait of a Beijing prostitute, who sends money home for her loving father's cancer treatments. Uproar greeted the director's revelation that the main character did not know that her life would end up projected in film festivals. A petition circulated to pull it from the competition, and the programmers made space for a four-hour discussion between Xu and his critics. The jury still gave it a prize. Truth be told, it is unclear that any of the subjects in the competition films realize they are being seen on the international film-festival circuit. The scene here is too fluid and ad hoc, not to mention heroically renegade, to pay attention to such details. This, too, will soon change.

The other major section of Yunfest is the "community video" program, or what would usually be referred to as indigenous or First Nations documentary. This is how Yunfest started out; the visual anthropologists were running a variety of village projects and wanted a public forum for their work. This year's Yunfest featured their own Yunnan-Vietnam Community-Based Visual Education and Communication Project, Wu Wenguang's China Villager Documentary Project, and a handful of other NGO-sponsored organizations. Not surprisingly, these nonprofessional villagers use video for everything everybody else does: home movies, the preservation of ephemeral cultural practices, activism, and weddings. All of these projects are experiments: show villagers how to use a camera and edit—and then see what happens. However, several villagers revealed that they had purchased their own cheap, Chinese-made camcorders, indicating that this "lab work" will soon become a normalized documentary culture in rural China.

What fascinates is the positioning of community video in Yunfest. It is by far the largest program, running day and night in one venue. Its well-attended discussion was fully eight hours in length. The villagers were hardly marginalized, as is typical at other film festivals. Aside from the visibility of their colorful costumes, they had their own party with lots of music and dancing from Yunnan's many ethnic minorities. They also provided entertainment for the opening and closing ceremonies. Curiously, the Tibetan filmmakers played background music for the award presentations, and decorated each winner with silk scarves. After it was over and most of the audience had left, they just couldn't stop playing and those that remained to chat enjoyed an impromptu Tibetan dance jam. Yunfest managed all this, despite the competition, without a whiff of tokenism.

Amid this celebratory and cheerful atmosphere, there is also a sharp edge to the proceedings. Some of the community video filmmakers use their cameras to protest everything from environmental degradation to the impact of tourism to official corruption. And nearly every competition film would make government authorities cringe.

It's no wonder that weeks before the 2007 Yunfest, the government, in the words of festival director Yi Secheng, "suggested we 'postpone' Yunfest until a later date, but they gave no indication . . . when that later date might come." After some scrambling, they told their guests to come after all, transplanting the festival to the picturesque mountain town of Dali. Yunfest had not asked for permission to exist, nor had it submitted any films for inspection or censorship. Thus, it was clear that the government was tracking the entry films making their way to Kunming. More than one programmer and filmmaker in China told me the same thing: "They know everything." However, this year's festival went off without any visible hitch, although one of the organizers was called in several times to defend the event. Obviously, he did a convincing job of it.

The China Documentary Film Festival in Songzhuang has also had run-ins with authorities. It was shut down in 2007. Like Yunfest, they simply regrouped and quietly moved to an unobtrusive location. During the recent festivals, they had visits by plainclothes policemen, who apparently got bored and disappeared mid-week. Independent documentary is playing a cat-and-mouse game with the government. The latter has opened up a measured free space, the limits of which are constantly tested by filmmakers and festivals alike. Here is a good example illustrating how it works. Anything called a "film festival" in China falls under the bureaucracy overseeing cinema—as in celluloid—and must ask authorities for permission to organize, and then submit to full censorship proceedings. But Yunfest is an "image exhibition" (ying xiang zhan) and Songzhuang is an "exchange week" (jiao liu zhou) so by virtue of verbiage they fall under a less strict bureaucracy that oversees DVDs. This enables the film authorities to simply look the other way while independent documentarists tackle controversial subjects in novel cinematic styles.

There are still limits, although the Songzhuang organizers are particularly aggressive in pushing them. One night at the 2008 edition, an unusual number of people milled around the theater after the last film. Everyone had the same hushed question: "Is it on?" They soon shuffled back into the theater. The festival director, Zhu Rikun, inspected the audience to

Clockwise from top left: Iberia's Zhang Yaxuan leading Yunfest community film discussion. Yunfest party with ethnic dancers. Yunfest director Yi Secheng sings at an evening party. Iberia film exhibit opening. Construction at Songzhuang. Songzhuang dinner, from left: filmmaker Zhao Liang, Yamagata director Fujioka Asako, Abé Mark Nornes.

Top two: Abé Mark Nornes. Middle left: Hatano Yukie. Middle right: Abé Mark Nornes. Bottom left: Hatano Yukie. Bottom right: Xueyin. Courtesy of CIFA.

ensure only invitees were seated. Then he locked the doors, and showed a film they knew could get them in trouble.

Obviously, the government hardly needs this kind of troublemaking to turn the new wave of contemporary documentary to still water. Film history shows that a key arrest or imprisonment is all it takes to shut down cinematic rabble-rousing. For now, however, the Chinese government has opened up a zone for independence, and documentary film culture is flourishing.

This kind of film culture still requires infrastructure and that in turn demands capital. In one sense the festivals and cine-clubs are working in the place of an as-to-be-created distribution system. And the festivals play the important role of a networking space to share work, build reputations, and spread the word about new films. At the same time, anyone can show a video in a café, but festivals are very expensive affairs. Yunfest is dependent on the largess of NGOs for its existence. The example of the China Documentary Film Festival, however, is far more unconventional and emblematic of the massive changes China has undergone since the turn of the century.

Songzhuang's host is Li Xianting's Film Fund. Li is a famous art critic best known for his unflagging support of modernist artists in the 1980s and 90s. His stamp of approval gave institutional credibility and cultural capital to the generation of artists that is now the object of breathtaking speculation on the international art market. Many of these artists were living near Beijing's Summer Palace, in a colony that was demolished in anticipation of the Olympics. Li, with the blessing of his farmer neighbors, issued an invitation to move to his hometown of Songzhuang. Incredibly, the artists moved en masse to this small village just outside of Beijing (just far enough from the center to relax the grip of the state on artists and filmmakers and programmers).

Thus, the 2008 China Documentary Film Festival was held in one enormous, dusty construction site—a surreal mirror image of all the demolition rendered in the competition films. Everywhere one looked were the half-finished, splendid homes and studios of artists, now fabulously wealthy thanks to the likes of Sotheby's. The main drag was filled with new galleries. Every restaurant in town is decorated with stunning paintings. The festival's spanking-new venue was littered with plates of cut pineapple, which we were assured would absorb the dizzying fumes of wet paint.

As part of their appreciation for the nurturing of Li Xianting, these same wealthy artists have supported his film fund and its festival. The studio itself is housed in Li's old home, a compound (also under construction) with theater, editing suites outfitted with Mac workstations, a video library, and guest house. In a corner of director Zhu Rikun's office stands a statue by Yue Minjun that is surely worth more than the entire complex. This is where Zhu presides over the China Documentary Film Festival and the Beijing Independent Film Festival. The festivals are held in a cavernous new art museum and a movie theater that, naturally, sports an art gallery like every other building in town.

Songzhuang is just as intimate as Yunfest but, perhaps because of its proximity to the seat of government, it feels far more intense. Here the competition is clearly the center of attention. There is the sense—not least because of the omnipresent dust, clanging, and smell of wet paint—that something utterly new is under construction here . . . here in Songzhuang and here in China itself. And the films bear this out.

At the very same time, I cannot help feeling that what's exciting about contemporary documentary in China is coming to a close, that the wave is just now peaking. Consider Iberia, a massive gallery in the heart of 798 Art Zone. This is the expansive munitions factory turned artist colony: 158 acres of galleries, auction houses, and artist studios. A businessman who made his fortune in Europe bankrolls Iberia. Its stunning space, once a factory for war, now displays and sells the latest Chinese art. It also employs a film curator, Zhang Yaxuan, who is particularly devoted to the nonfiction form. (She is also a documentary director in her own right with *A Disappearance Foretold* [2008], a "demolition film" that played at this year's Yunfest.)

This April, Iberia held its inaugural film exhibition, appropriately centering on the six documentary film venues they deem most important. They include Yunfest, Li Xianting's Film Fund, and the China Documentary Film Festival. The others are Fanhall Films, CCD Workstation, and Indie Workshop. Fanhall is a collective of film fans based in Songzhuang that support their own independent theater by advertising design work. CCD Workstation is Wu Wenguang's dance and video collective, which is hosted by a wealthy businessman who loves documentary (and also lives on the premises). Indie Workshop and the closely affiliated Nanjing Film Festival (which is also supported by a rich businessman) have a far more expansive and eclectic conception of documentary thanks to the leadership of Zhang Xianming, a filmmaker, actor, and Beijing Film Academy professor.

Iberia's Inaugural Exhibition ran for three weeks and projected over eighty films in their new theater. While this testifies to the vibrancy of contemporary documentary, it also signals its institutionalization and the formation of a canon. Indeed, the other significant activity spearheaded by Zhang Yaxuan is the welcome establishment of a documentary film

archive at Iberia. In other words, Chinese independent documentary has matured to the point of demanding an archive. It is now not simply "contemporary," but also "historical."

Interestingly enough, Yunfest's catalogue featured a significant exchange in essays by Zhang Xianming and Zhang Yaxuan (no relation). The former, something of a trickster, wrote, "Yunfest has only been going on for a few years and people are already calling it a meeting of middle-aged people to exchange their films about old people." To this Zhang Yaxuan issued a repost: "This theme is a response to Zhang Xianming's assertion that independent film is destined to die . . . My belief is that we are watching Chinese documentary film form its own tradition. Once that tradition is formed, it will have unstoppable power."

Personally, I think both are correct. Chinese documentary is surely unstoppable, but it has also ossified into an academic and increasingly stale (and excessively easy to produce) direct cinema. As a reaction to both Communist agitprop and conventional broadcast television, this form is probably to be expected. However, like any New Wave or cohesive movement in the history of film, the wave will break. The movement will sputter. This is the *only* rule of cinema that cannot be broken.

The most cogent sign of the beginning of the end appeared in the form of a protest letter broadcast globally via the Internet in fall 2008. Signed by thirteen filmmakers, it condemned the New York distributor Reel China. This is essentially the concerted and well-meaning work of a New York fan of Chinese independent documentary (with the collaboration of North American academics). The international exposure they facilitated across North American universities electrified audiences and sparked a deep interest to learn more (it seems every modern Chinese Studies scholar has an essay, dissertation, or book in the pipeline).

Ironically, Reel China so deeply identified with the movement's rambunctious anything-goes attitude that they apparently accomplished their good work without bothering to clear rights. In many cases, they even failed to inform filmmakers that their work was being distributed!

The signers of the protest were not calling for back payments or declaring their intention to sue. However, they were demanding contractual relationships, hinting at a sea change about to take place. Reel China was operating in the same renegade style as the director of *Wheat Harvest*. It is this freewheeling, no-holds-barred approach to documentary—and to film festival programming and viewing—that has made contemporary Chinese documentary so utterly fascinating. But the filmmakers are newly professionalizing. They are initiating foreign financing deals and hope dearly for foreign distribution, or better yet broadcast. They are getting older, getting married, and having children. Income is more of a priority. At the same time, the films are swiftly becoming more polished, raising the bar and hinting at an impending end to this ad hoc, do-it-yourself ethos. And when the government's free zone becomes official, as it most certainly will, a formal distribution network will relieve the rich artists and businessmen of the responsibility of connecting filmmakers to audiences.

Having tired of their conservative devotion to direct cinema, not to mention roughshod camerawork and sound for otherwise amazing films, I look forward to something new. Naturally, this imminent end will not be a death, but rather a wondrous transformation.

Songzhuang director Zhu Rikun with statue by Yue Minjun

Courtesy of Li Xianting's Film Fund.

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ABSTRACT A report on the state of independent documentary filmmaking in China in 2009, covering in particular the Yunnan Multicultural Visual Festival (or Yunfest, as it is known) in Kunming and the China Documentary Film Festival in Songzhuang. A variety of factors have converged to make an anti-authoritarian documentary movement possible, but it may be ending as directors become professionalized.

KEYWORDS Chinese cinema, documentary, film festivals, censorship, Yunfest

L.A.'S HIPSTER CINEMA

DAVID E. JAMES SURVEYS THE LOS ANGELES AVANT-GARDE SCENE, FROM MUSEUMS TO VIDEO BILLBOARDS

AN EVENING AT THE MOVIES

On a balmy Thursday evening late in May 2008, I went to Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Arata Isozaki's bunker across the road from Frank Gehry's celebrated Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Music Center, and the other downtown culture citadels on the edge of the corporate monoliths on which they integrally depend. Although admission was free that day, the museum was all but deserted, especially the brutalist stainless steel and concrete theater where not more than half a dozen of us had gathered for one of the seven screenings of films and videos by conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner that accompanied the retrospective of his work at MOCA's other branch. A couple of people left after a few minutes, while the rest of us, in a painfully eloquent silence, fixed our attention on these abstruse works. Weiner's moving-image works range from what you would expect (films built around texts) to what you would not (hardcore pornography), but featured that evening was a film which invoked narrative. *Nothing to Lose* (*Niets Ann Verloren*, 1984) begins with a close-up of a beautiful, perhaps too beautiful, young man in a sailor's suit and cap. He cruises an industrial building in Amsterdam, in a window of which a skimpily dressed blonde proffers herself. Overlaid by an aural veneer of indecipherable chatter, their hesitant seduction is played out before another couple (dressed in period Dutch costume with lace bonnets) in another doorway of the same building. One is a man in drag, sulkily whittling on a cucumber, while the other, who is in fact a woman, scrubs her sheets on a washboard, looking up from time to time to cry out "Good Manners Spoil Good Food," and encourage the sailor on. As the camera moves freely among the four characters, the ritualized tableau is interrupted when from off-screen an apple is tossed into the frame, soon after which the sailor musters his courage—but only to kiss the lady quickly on the lips, then exit the frame to end the film.

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Echo Park Film Center audience

(Far right: David E. James.) May 22, 2008. Courtesy of Echo Park Film Center.

I was intrigued, but puzzled. How to understand the relation between the visual narrative and the washerwoman's cry, reminiscent as it is of the terse, often enigmatic phrases that are Weiner's idiosyncratic form of sculpture? Was it a reflexive comment on the sailor's desultory shopping, or was the narrative a dramatization of the phrase, parallel to, if visually much richer than, the realization of Weiner's other aphorisms on the museum's walls? Both routes between words and images seemed to presuppose not just that an appropriate hermeneutics would involve reading back from the artwork's material manifestation to the concept that generated it (Sol Lewitt's the "machine that makes the art"), but also that a complete explication was possible and indeed the point of the exercise.

After the screening, I drove ten minutes up the bad end of Sunset Boulevard from MOCA to Echo Park, a largely Latino working-class and bohemian community just up the road from the Echo, the hippest alternative music club in the city. The area used to be known as Red Hill, and some of its radical past and present is documented in Erika Suderburg's wonderful video documentary, *Somatography* (2000). The bustling intersection with Alvarado Street is marked by gas stations, bus stops, and taco stands, and next to a coffee shop festooned with fliers and Machine Project, a

storefront exhibition space, I found the Echo Park Film Center (EPFC). In a decrepit storefront lined with rental videos, among shelves of ancient projectors and editing equipment, rows of old theater and kitchen chairs had been set up. People milled around greeting each other, drinking coffee or beer in paper bags, while a woman kept chasing in after her dog, who preferred the scene here to next door at Machine Project (that night featuring a show about an endurance race for cars valued at $500 or less). Twenty minutes late, Lisa Marr introduced the evening's program of vintage Scopitones, music shorts that in the 1960s played on specially designed juke boxes. Featuring all kinds of pop songs, these precursors of music videos were mostly so bad that Susan Sontag thought them exemplary of camp. The crowd at EPFC would have agreed, hooting and cheering as various lounge singers mouthed along, mostly out of sync, accompanied by visuals featuring bevies of female dancers, stripped to the briefest of bikinis then permissible, who frugged, hitch-hiked, or swam for the maximum jiggle. The crowd's enjoyment and applause rose to dizzying crescendo with Joi Lansing's "The Web of Love," the Scopitone summa in which the buxom blonde is boiled by cannibals, enfolded by a human snake, and enmeshed in a rope web, all in lurid 1960s colors preserved in dye-transfer Technicolor.

For me, the evening was on its way to being epiphanic: the two events in two of L.A.'s adjacent but disjunct urban spaces appeared to span the possibilities of contemporary non-industrial film culture in general. Hadn't I inadvertently gone between the two surviving, but diametrically opposed, forms of the modernist avant-garde film tradition: on the one one hand, Weiner's arcane, reflexive hermeticism whose determined resistance to mass culture leaves it impenetrable to all but cognoscenti (and maybe even to them, for none of the poststructuralist art scribes who consecrated him in the catalogue undertook to demystify his films); and on the other hand, a demotic populism, bringing art back to the practice of everyday life by repurposing the detritus of industrial culture in an informal social ritual, one where hermeneutics is hardly an issue? My hypothesis held until the second set when, after more beer or coffee, the Scopitone of Sonny King's "I Cried For You" was screened.[1] As the lewd para-Ratpacker croons victoriously, the girls he now rejects strip to reveal the song's lyrics stenciled first on their underclothes and then, when these are removed, on their bodies. Here—suddenly and in the wrong place—were Weiner's materializations of language and, if not his porn, then something not far from it.

My musings on the cultural contradictions instanced in this revelation of the reciprocal imbrication, rather than the mutual exclusion of, high and low were brought full circle a couple of weeks later, when MOCA hosted a Saturday night outdoor free screening of Weiner's films. Buoyed by beers, well drinks, and DJ beats, the crowd appeared to be enjoying both the films and the starry evening, and even if they were as baffled as intrigued, they clearly relished the screening's creation of a cultural community, young people equally at home in an art museum as at the Echo. Here was L.A.'s hipster cinema.

Sonny King, "I Cried For You"

Scopitone, c. 1959

HIPSTER CINEMA: POLEMICS

In its original use in Thomas Kent Alexander's brief essay "San Francisco's Hipster Cinema,"[2] written in June 1966, the term invoked recent work by Bruce Baillie, Robert Nelson, Kenneth Anger, Bruce Conner, and other Bay Area "underground" filmmakers that was understood in terms of its categorical alterity to, if not the realism, then certainly the formal language of the Hollywood feature. Alexander's moment was caught in transition between, on the one hand, Beat generation politics of detachment and disaffiliation, and Jonas Mekas's idea of the oppositional, fundamentally ethical and existential (rather than aesthetic) nature of the New American Cinema; and, on the other hand, the more ecstatic countercultural politics mobilized by the hippies. Between these, the hipster was supposed to affirm a cool humanism constructed in "detachment from the mechanized, depersonalized computer society," a rat race characterized, according to Alexander, by superficiality, vapidity, dullness, and violence.

Though the precise meaning of "hipster" is presently in flux, since its revival in the late 1990s in Los Angeles it has usually referred to the consumers of indie music and film, many of whom are casual workers on the edges of the city's

Lawrence Weiner screening

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, June 14, 2008. Courtesy of Jessica Youn.

multiple culture and infotainment industries. Sometimes the term carries a derogatory implication of the fashionista's appropriation of the accoutrements of various post-punk and hip-hop cultures combined with the refusal or avoidance of whatever real social contestation these might have entailed. The simultaneous revival and reconstruction of the term imply both a desire for some authentically real politics and the present difficulty of actually engaging them. Occupying the space between the desire and its impossibility is the spectacle, the contemporary media system in which life as it might be lived is reflected back in the form of signs of commodities and signs as commodities. Any cultural activity that engages this media system will find its search for authenticity inhabited by irony and ambivalence.

Of the myriad other social and cultural developments that separate the hipster of summer 1966 from the hipster of fall 2008, none is more important than the reconfiguration of the imaginary role of the computer. Then it was associated with social control and so opposed to humane life, but now it is integral to everything; whereas the earlier hipster looked to avant-garde film as a "vital, alive and moving" defense against it, today the computer has become the major vehicle of culture. Despite the ancestry of new media's formal properties in the innovations of experimental film, whatever avant-garde moving-image culture might mean or accomplish in the future, it will not be filmic but computerized.

That such combined technological and social developments have inevitably already redirected the aspirations and

practices of the filmic avant-garde is evidenced in the recent activity of the two senior Los Angeles practitioners, Pat O'Neill and Morgan Fisher. Both came to maturity with definitive bodies of work in the 1970s, the last time when the concept of the avant-garde in any of its modernist senses had any stability; both *oeuvres* were crucially film-specific, and by that token now superceded. O'Neill's sublime image manipulations, conducted within the very skin of the film, whose precision obliged him twenty years ago to move from 16mm to 35mm, can now be approximated with home-computer software, while Fisher's reflexive meditations on the specificity of 35mm technology are perforce archeological. Perhaps as a consequence, neither has made a film in the past five years. However, both have found at least a temporary haven in the art world with recent shows in important galleries, respectively of sculpture and digital installations and of painting. Such reorientations don't necessarily mean the end of advanced filmmaking; as long as the technology is available, people will make films, just as they still occasionally unhook their iPods and sing folk songs. But they do indicate that its historical project is being reconstructed in a new technological and social environment, one that is—ironically and contradictorily—characterized by the realization of many of the ambitions of the historical avant-garde in intertwined utopian and dystopian forms.

On the one hand, first on the level of form: the modernist formal innovations that San Francisco underground film and the mid-century avant-garde used to assault the linear narrative of the illusionist feature film (and the repressive bourgeois culture it generally sustained) are now ubiquitous in corporate media. Collage, reflexivity, denatured imagery, multiple fractured diegeses, interpenetrating windows, shifting combinations of image, text, and sound—all these form the vehicular language that presently operates across all cultural levels. Second, on the level of practice: where avant-garde film struggled heroically but usually unsuccessfully against capital's need to segregate cultural producers and consumers, digital technologies have facilitated a pro-am media democratization. A previously unimaginable production and distribution of user-generated content on YouTube, blogs, viral videos, and a range of other platforms can now give a homemade YouTube clip more hits than the most successful blockbuster film. Beneath its advent under the guise of "empowerment," this form of labor is, of course, as functional as was physical labor in the period where material production was primary and cultural activity entirely restricted to consumption.

So, on the other hand, the cultural field is now entirely permeated by capital and its multiple molecular estrangements to the point where advertising has become the summary and all-pervasive mode of culture. If as recently as thirty years ago in San Francisco, in the twilight of modernism, the production of films that mobilized alternatives to a reified bourgeois order had a felt utility, now—in an era of saturated overproduction of all kinds—emancipation is thought to revolve around the politics of consumption. Advertising, the enforcer of consumption, also patrols culture, not merely its economics, but also its form. It's now a commonplace that avant-garde stylistics have been appropriated and defused by advertising. More fundamental and important are the processes that began well before the Internet and digital technology made them ubiquitous: advertising's communication codes (that work in fragments across multiple media and are received piecemeal in distraction and subconsciously reassembled) now provide the dominant procedures of all contemporary aesthetic reception.

As we find ourselves amid the multiple screens of corporate kitsch that endlessly insist on consumption, the Situationist utopian injunction, "Never Work" can now only mean "Never Watch, Never Listen." This impossibility will ride with us and the vanguard hipsters in our automotive *flânerie* across the fragmented metropolis to sample the spectacle and its alternatives. What follows is a synchronic slice through the alternative media systems encountered in the summer and fall of 2008. This period, the run-up to the election of the forty-fourth U.S. president, was one of unusually significant cultural contestation that, it should be noted, will be remembered most of all by the image of Barack Obama

Pat O'Neill, *London Marble*

Installation, Rosamund Felsen Gallery. June 14–July 12, 2008.

LINKS

7 Dudley Cinema at SPONTO Gallery: www.81x.com/7dudley/cinema
Abstract Movie Workshop: www.johnadamczyk.com/workshop.html
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences: www.oscars.org
Afterall: www.afterall.org/events.html
Art Office for Film + Video: artoffice.org
Center for Visual Music: www.centerforvisualmusic.org
The Cinefamily and The Silent Movie Theatre: www.silentmovietheatre.com
Cinematheque 108: cinematheque108@cinema.usc.edu
Cinespesia Cemetery Screenings: cinespia@earthlink.net
Down Town Art Walk: www.downtownartwalk.com
Dublab: www.dublab.com
Echo Park Film Center: www.echoparkfilmcenter.org
The Engine Theater: www.theenginetheater.com
Film Radar: www.filmradar.com
Flicker: www.hi-beam.net/cgi-bin/flicker.pl
FREEWAVES: www.freewaves.org
Hollywood MobMov: www.hollywoodmobmov.org
The iotaCenter: www.iotacenter.org
KAOS Network: www.projectblowed.com
Kim Light Gallery: www.kimlightgallery.com
The Los Angeles Filmforum: lafilmforum.wordpress.com
Machine Project: machineproject.com
The Museum of Contemporary Art: www.moca-la.org
New Town Pasadena: www.newtownarts.org
Nokia Theatre L.A. LIVE: www.nokiatheatrelalive.com
Phantom Galleries LA: www.phantomgalleriesla.com
REDCAT: www.redcat.org
Visual Communications: www.vconline.org/index.cfm
Women in the City: www.womeninthecity.org

made by Shepard Fairey, the quintessential hipster artist. If that and the other sights in the hipster cinema do not comprise a modernist avant-garde, they may nevertheless suggest ways of consuming what the age does provide, at least somewhat, *avant-gardedly*.

VENUES AND ORGANIZATIONS

The Los Angeles Filmforum was founded in 1975 as the Pasadena Filmforum, in a bright period where three or four other similar screening organizations flourished in the city. (Full disclosure: I have been closely involved with Filmforum for the past thirty years, and a board member for most of that time; given this, I will refrain from evaluating its success or significance.) Filmforum outlived them all, surviving cutbacks in public funding, the academicization and then the corporatization of identity politics, the shift from 16mm film to video and then to digital production, and tough times generally. By the mid-1990s it was the only ongoing alternative screening organization in the city.

Filmforum's present director (appointed in 2003) is Adam Hyman. He has mounted around thirty-five shows per year, addressing the main traditions of the avant-garde. Programming has included evenings devoted to Carolee Schneemann, Heinz Emigholz, Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, Robert Breer, Coleen Fitzgibbon, Walter Ungerer, as well as several younger filmmakers. A highlight at the end of 2008 was a presentation of Susan Mogul's new feature, *Driving Men*. The work is an autobiographical excavation of the intertwined genealogies of her sexual and artistic identities. It deftly interweaves several strands: fragments of her earlier work as one of L.A.'s pioneer video artists and video diarists; both still and moving images drawn from her forty-year self-documentation projects; and interviews with family members, former lovers, and her present partner. Mogul's turn from short, often confrontational video art to feature-length works that at least hold the possibility of wider distribution is, of course, one of several historically determined responses to the decline of the autonomous avant-garde.

For most of its history Filmforum moved between various venues across the city, but since 2002 it has settled at one of the most famous of movie palaces, Sid Grauman's Egyptian Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard, opened in 1922 and recently restored. Located now in the "Belly of the Beast" (the title of an extensive 1994 Filmforum retrospective of the L.A. avant-garde), the new venue figures the integrated and reciprocal relation between the avant-garde and the industry that has given L.A. filmmaking its prototypicality. Reflecting this reciprocity, the Filmforum website maintains links with all other screenings in the numerous alternative venues that have sprung up since the millennium and now reticulate the city. Hyman also sends out email listings. (These emails are supplemented by Film Radar, a website that tracks all kinds of local non-mainstream cinema events, news, and reviews, and Flicker, which provides the same service nationally.)

The more recently established venues are positioned on a spectrum that ranges from amateur screenings, through various kinds of indie production, to the projections of the industry itself. The other avant-garde screening organizations are typically either associated with educational institutions or

The REDCAT Theatre

Courtesy of Heiko Burnison and Anthony Rzeteljski.

museums—like MOCA—or based in community projects of one kind or another—like the EPFC. The former group also includes REDCAT, the Roy and Edna Disney/Cal Arts Theater, housed downtown in the bottom of the Disney Concert Hall; the Bijou Theater at California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts) itself that regularly screens the best in global art and avant-garde film; Cinematheque 108, an irregular series of public screenings at the University of Southern California (USC) founded by my colleague Michael Renov and often programmed by myself; and the Film and Television Archives at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Grassroots establishments, sustained as they are by a greater—or more usually lesser—degree of public funding include LA Freewaves, self-described as a "grassroots yet global arts organization connecting innovative, relevant, independent new media from around the world," best known for an enormously innovative annual video festival; NewTown Pasadena, a curatorial collective, self-described as a "Persistent Weed in the Garden of Art" that among many pioneering undertakings has screened avant-garde films in a variety of unconventional venues; KAOS Network, a community arts center that since 1984 has provided training in video production and other media arts for mostly African American youth; Visual Communications, inarguably the premier Asian Pacific media arts center in the U.S., that since 1970 has promoted Asian American film and video production; and 7 Dudley Cinema, a storefront by the beach, known especially for radically confrontational documentaries. All these either screen or sponsor screenings of non-corporate and often anti-corporate time-based media, and of them, REDCAT and an anomalous organization, Cinefamily, have made the strongest impact.

An annex added during the protracted construction period for the Walt Disney Concert Hall for Los Angeles Philharmonic, REDCAT was designed to be the downtown experimental satellite for Cal Arts, founded by Disney in 1961 and the most renowned of the city's many major art schools whose presence is fundamental to its overall cultural vitality—and its hipster culture. REDCAT comprises a gallery and an especially flexible and technologically advanced presentation space that accommodates dance, music, theater, film, video, as well as intermedia combinations of these. With a remarkably precise and bright 16mm projection (one of the best in the world on the testimony of Peter Kubelka, no less) and a bar and bookshop, in the five years it has been open it has become a popular screening space, usually featuring audiences of between one and two hundred people many Monday evenings.

The screenings are curated by Steve Anker, Dean of the Cal Arts film school, and Bérénice Reynaud, one of the school's most distinguished professors. Though both have a wide knowledge of noncommercial cinema, Anker's primary commitment is, broadly speaking, to the U.S. avant-garde, with Reynaud's to global art cinema; her interest in post-Fifth Generation film has meant that the Chinese avant-garde has often been more accessible in Los Angeles than in Beijing.

Aiming for overall programming of one third each of local, U.S., and globally produced works, and backed by the publicity and other resources of REDCAT, their fall season was first-rate, surely the equal of any comparable venue in the world. In November alone, they presented evenings devoted to Robert Breer, Kenneth Anger, Paul McCarthy, Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder, Martin Arnold, and Joan Jonas, all with the filmmakers present. Perhaps more oriented to the U.S. avant-garde than is usual, the schedule included world premieres of new films by Anger and the first theatrical presentation of McCarthy's *Caribbean Pirates* (2001–05), previously seen only in Germany and as an installation.

Though Anger's films are trivial and McCarthy's vacuous and bombastic, the reputations of both artists are so high that even the limitations of these works did not detract from the social significance of their presentation: Anger is one of the few surviving avatars of underground film and McCarthy, a doyen of transgressive (or, I would say, regressive) performance art turned filmmaker, has a cachet as powerful as the socially sanctioned theater and classical music of the Bunker Hill elites. Despite this, neither was powerful enough to puncture the ignorance of, and disdain for, any form of non-Hollywood cinema that is widespread in the city's established institutions, and in a special feature on REDCAT on its fifth anniversary in November 2008, the *Los Angeles Times* sent its ace theater, music, and art critics to evaluate the record—but completely omitted any reference to the film and video programming.[3]

If, despite the *Times*, REDCAT elevates the generally marginalized filmic avant-garde to parity with high bourgeois culture, the Cinefamily does the opposite, taking the avant-garde back below the salt, and reasserting its populist, demotic roots. Located on Fairfax Avenue not far from Melrose Avenue, L.A. hipsterdom's central shopping district, Cinefamily is housed in what until a few years ago was the last operating venue dedicated to silent films, and which—despite the recent installation of sound equipment—is still called the Silent Movie Theater. The theater had been closed since 1997, when the owner was shot three times in the face with a .357 magnum by a hit man hired by his lover, the projectionist. It was then bought and run by Charlie Lustman for several years, with middling success and programming, as a silent movie venue. The Harkhamen family, which owns many spaces on Fairfax Avenue, bought it from Lustman in 2007. Cinefamily took over the dead space, banished its ghosts, and turned it into a carnival. Founded by Hadrian Belove (former co-owner of Cinefile Video) and Dan Harkhamen, and now maintained by them along with Amalia Levari, Tom Fitzgerald, and occasional volunteers, its self-declared aspiration to create "unusual programs of exceptional, distinctive, weird and wonderful films" welcomes the avant-garde. The fall screenings included George Kuchar; experimental animator Don Hertzfeldt; former punk filmmaker, Jem Cohen; Bill Morrison; a series of forgotten films selected from the catalogues of Canyon Cinema, Electronic Arts Intermix, and The Filmmaker's Co-op; and *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), with live musical accompaniment. All these could have appeared at REDCAT or Filmforum, and indeed many were co-presented by the latter. But Cinefamily intermixed them with, on the one hand, classic art films from both Hollywood and abroad (Aleksandr Medvedkin's *Happiness* [1934], Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* [2003], Rudolph Valentino in *The Eagle* [1925], an Ozu series) and, on the other, with para-cinematic oddments and rarities (*Decampment* [2008], a silent and experimental horror short by Midwestern musical grindmeisters, Adult; protest films from the 1960s; a series of homemade horror films; early hip-hop films; a series of films about evil children co-presented by Meltdown Comics and Pimpadelic Wonderland; Christploitation; and "Fucked-Up Kids' Movies"—"the most demented batch of made-for-kiddie goodies").

Heretically interrupting and contextualizing the purity of the avant-garde, these innovations in scheduling, in the structure of the *filmic*, are accompanied by similarly radical innovations in the *cinematic*, in the social functions the films sustain. The Cinefamily's publicly stated goal is "to foster a spirit of community and a sense of discovery, while reinvigorating the movie-going experience. Like campfires, sporting events and church services, we believe that movies work best as social experiences." The emphasis on the community of film lovers is sustained by several innovations: instead of charging for separate admissions, Cinefamily encourages people to pay $25 a month, "the cost of two tickets and a bucket of popcorn," in return for which they receive unlimited entry; though the theater itself is relatively conventional, it is supplemented by a backyard patio where between shows people drink the coffee that is for sale, along whatever else they may have smuggled in; and many screenings are coordinated with musical events (early in the new year, Tom Verlaine and Jimmy Rip played live to accompany shorts by Man Ray, Fernand Léger, and Hans Richter in two—needless to say—sold-out shows). But the Labor Day event was an awesome cinematic reimagining of the traditional backyard barbeque. It began with "The 5 Minutes Game," in which the first five minutes of twenty rare films,

not available on DVD, were screened, with the audience choosing the one to be projected in it entirety after the meal. As the program read:

> 6:00pm–8:00pm: The 5 Minutes Game
> 8:00pm–9:00pm: BBQ time!
> 9:00pm–11:00pm: we watch the winning film!

An irreverent escapade, it nevertheless possessed a flawless avant-garde lineage: the first part was a filmic "exquisite corpse," recalling the Surrealists' *dérive* from theater to theater in order to create a discontinuous dream narrative; the second part interrupted the autonomy of the filmic with a celebratory communal ritual; and the final screening, which turned out to be the low-budget classic, *Death Promise* (1977), reflected the spectators' immediate communal desires as well perhaps as their problems with obnoxious landlords. A panoply of radical gestures, all mobilized together on the one day a year we celebrate the working class!

In creating a local community in a city where all commentators agree that civic governance is the tool of corporate development, Cinefamily has in the one year of its existence been magnificently successful, not only in creating its own loyal audience (with regular attendance between 100 and a sell-out 175 five nights a week), but also in contributing to the revitalization of its immediate environment. Neighboring storefronts that recently were dark and empty are now bookshops, including the Harkhamen's own Family bookstore a couple of blocks away (which via Sammy Harkhamen's work as a graphic novelist, links Cinefamily to another semi-underground community), record, designer-sneaker, and skate stores, and soon another café.

Oskar Fischinger, *Muntz TV*

16mm film still. © Fischinger Trust. Courtesy of Center for Visual Music.

Surrounding or subtending these flagship developments are complementary cultural initiatives. One is formed by the several extremely important preservation and historical recovery projects including the Center for Visual Music (CVM), a nonprofit archive directed by Cindy Keefer that restores and distributes the work of Oskar Fischinger, Jordan Belson, and other abstract animators; the iotaCenter, a self-described "arts organization devoted to Abstract Cinema and Visual Music"; the UCLA Film and Television Archive, where Ross Lipman specializes in avant-garde and independent cinema; and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) that has for several years been preserving avant-garde films, both by local and often otherwise inadequately recognized artists and the titans of the medium. Under the guidance of Mark Toscano, AMPAS is at present, for example, restoring Stan Brakhage's complete works. And, modeled on a writers' workshop, the Los Angeles Abstract Movie Workshop meets monthly at the Museum of Jurassic Technology (created by one-time avant-garde filmmaker, David Wilson) for members to show and critique new works and works-in-progress. Around these well-established institutions lies a host of more or less ephemeral, more or less virtual, and more or less reclusive micro-cinemas that emanate primarily from three ancillary cultural spheres: the art world, the music world, and the film industry itself, which indeed substantially shapes the other two.

Since at least the early 1920s, fine artists in Los Angeles have both found professional occupation in the film industry and worked independently outside it, generating a strong, if uneven and idiosyncratic, tradition of artists' films that runs from Borris Deutsch through Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari to, at present, Sharon Lockhart, Charlie White, and Jennifer West (all of whom teach art—not film—at USC). Drawing on the strong local tradition of visual music epitomized by the career of Oskar Fischinger (who on several occasions himself sold his skills to advertisers, the last being a commercial he made in Los Angeles for televisions manufactured by "Madman" Muntz), an adjacent tradition of fine-art video and now high-tech digital projection has developed over the past two decades and produced several bona fide stars who make what a couple of decades ago would have been thought of as expanded cinema. Most notable are Diana Thater, who makes large site-specific installations, often featuring natural imagery, and Jennifer Steinkamp, who works with both natural imagery and quasi-psychedelic abstractions. For "Left Humerus," a summer show at the Acme gallery, for example, Steinkamp projected swirling clouds of mostly primary

Black Dice in performance at the Echo

Photo: David E. James.

colors surging into and out of the elbow formed by two adjacent gallery walls.[4]

The stature of digital projection of this kind is currently so high that every third gallery shows some form of time-based imagery; the appropriately named Lightbox at the Kim Light gallery is only one of the more interesting of them. And screens, windows, and projections are similarly ubiquitous on the monthly downtown art walk through the hippest new galleries and even, in a sumptuous ironic return, one case in a converted Main Street movie palace. Other, more peripheral or noncommercial art-world micro-cinemas include "The abc of cinema: Gilles Deleuze's 'From A to Z,'" curated by Marie Jager and Hedi El Kholti under the auspices of the publishing enterprise *Semiotext(e)*, that since 2006 has been occasionally screening avant-garde films at a fashionable—if noisy—bar, the Mandrake; and a new online exhibition project called "Moving Index" hosted by the Art Office for Film + Video that each two months features digital work by three different artists.

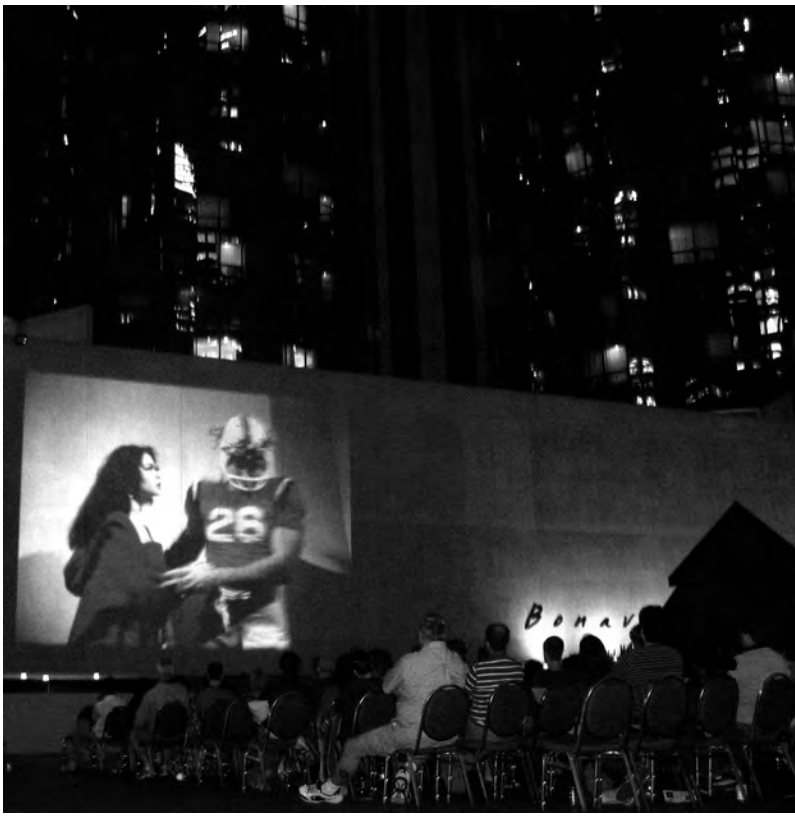
As amalgamated into the art world, digital projections have become the most prominent form of visual music, but in a more ephemeral way they have also become integral to musical performance, especially rock and dance music. This local practice of this kind of film was inaugurated by the Single Wing Turquoise Bird, the most important of L.A.'s 1960s rock'n'roll light-shows, the historiography of which is currently undergoing something of a revival. Though ignorant of their ancestry, its descendants are, of course, integral to raves, but they also appear in the funkiest little clubs; the last I saw, for example, was a performance at the Echo, close to the EPFC, by Black Dice, a band that generates its own music and light simultaneously. Several local organizations systematically sustain this connection between indie music and film, the most prominent being Dublab, a decade-old nonprofit group that maintains an Internet radio station primarily concerned with electronic, post-punk, and ambient music, but that also sponsors videos and films, and produces an email newsletter publicizing their own and other audio-visual events.[5]

An unbroken spectrum links corporate pop to the most determinedly anti-corporate music, and every point on that spectrum produces film and video correlatives whose languages mostly derive from avant-garde film; consequently, the circumambient presence of music in urban life is ever more rapidly being reciprocated in the increased environmental presence of forms of the visual avant-garde. Similarly ranging from the amateur to the most commercial, these form a media architecture that is coming to be as

inescapable as the aural environment of music. One of the specificities that continues to make Los Angeles the prototype of the postmodern conurbation is the pervasive presence of cinematic, para-cinematic, and now virtual screens in the urban fabric. Twenty years ago, Baudrillard asked: "Where is the cinema? It is all around you outside, all over the city, that marvelous, continuous performance of films and scenarios."[6] This question may have prematurely collapsed the ontological difference between film and reality, but the conception of the cityscape as itself a screenscape is now phenomenologically indisputable. No account of cinema in L.A. can avoid the injunctions of postmodern geographers (including the schools at UCLA and USC) that we must think spatially, one aspect of which entails recognition that contemporary moving-image culture is realized architecturally. Urban hipsters find avant-garde film, not simply by visiting the institutions surveyed above, but ambiently in the visuality of the city itself where, whether tiny or huge, screens are so ubiquitous that together they become almost as seamless as sound. Everywhere, the avant-garde takes place.

BETWEEN CITY LIGHTS AND CELL PHONES

A logical if not chronological point of origin for the spatial surround of visuals that derive from avant-garde film is the tradition of outdoor screenings (like Weiner's at MOCA) that began in Los Angeles with Louis Hock's early 1970s projections of his wry travelogue, *Southern California* (1979) on the walls of city buildings or on the sides of trucks. This tradition has recently been revived and institutionally sustained. Perhaps the most dramatic instance in the period covered was a late-summer, three-week series of science-fiction-inspired films and artists' videos on an outside wall of the downtown postmodern citadel, the Bonaventure Hotel, hosted by Afterall, a publishing outfit affiliated with both Cal Arts and Central Saint Martins College of Art in London. The evening I attended, August 21, was a Kuchar double bill: George's *Ascension of the Demonoids* (1985) and Mike's *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965). It was eerie seeing *Fleshapoid*'s fake spaceships framed by the hotel's mirrored towers and space-shuttle elevators while police and corporate helicopters hovered above and the squad-car sirens screamed in the streets below. It reminded me of Fredric Jameson's designation of the Bonaventure as the paradigmatic postmodern building; it slipped into another dimension when I realized that *Fleshapoid*'s plot of two robots falling in love in the far distant future was the same as *Blade Runner*'s and that it was now being projected in *Blade Runner*'s own hyper-hallucinogenic architectural environment.



Mike Kuchar, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*

Afterall screening, Westin Bonaventure Hotel, August 21, 2008. Courtesy of Stacey Allan.

Other instances of these outdoor and often peripatetic screenings range from the Engine Theater to the Hollywood MobMov and the Cinespeia Cemetery Screenings. Inspired by the putative capacity of so-called prosumer moving-image technology to threaten "the corporate media empire as never before," the former rolls out its portable projection system featuring a 1000-pound light-and-steel sculpture that kinetically supports a seventeen-foot screen to show "underground films" at various outdoor locations. Fall offerings range from "Experimental Eros" (erotic-themed work by George Kuchar, Lewis Klahr, and Peggy Ahwesh) to "Experiments in Terror" that combined recreations of 1960s psychedelic nightmares and 70s drive-in horror. Both were curated by Noel Lawrence, formerly associated with Craig Baldwin's Other Cinema in San Francisco. Like a filmic rave, MobMov (MOBile MOVie) is a "Guerilla Drive-in" that surreptitiously shows movies in unused city spaces. And Cinespia screens in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, resting place of Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, Jayne Mansfield, and many more Hollywood greats, immediately adjacent to the Paramount Pictures studio, built in 1912. Audiences as large as 2500 bring blankets, cushions, and gourmet dinners along with wine and candles to spend summer weekend evenings on a half-acre lawn between the tombs to watch films

Nancy Buchanan, *3 Fates*

Photo: Doug Wichert, Liza Simone, and Phantom Galleries.

projected on the white marble mausoleum. The work screened tends to be cult classics, but if the recontextualization of the films, the creation of a community around them, the DJs spinning dance music before the show—and the possibility that what remains of Peter Lorre is silently turning in the ground under you as you relish his virtual image in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)—don't make them avant-garde then nothing will. But these instances are institutionally framed; for cinema's spontaneous occupation of the city proper we have to go to the streets themselves, where real struggles are occurring.

The general context involves the ongoing Billboard Wars, currently being fought by neighborhood activists against the billboard industry and the city's craven planning commission over "sign districts," where massive (up to seventy-six-feet-high) digital billboards would be permitted. In this battle, avant-garde film's history of formal innovation and especially the utopian dreams of "expanded cinema" now find themselves confronted by the negative, inverted forms of the emancipatory politics that once inspired them.

For some time artists have been contesting the commercialization of public space by "detourning" billboards. Such interventions range from the use of graffiti in poorer areas (a practice that in L.A. goes back at least forty years, when Harry Gamboa Jr. began spraying "Chicano Cinema" on East L.A. hoardings) to a project in the spring by one Mike Mills. As well as being a maker of music videos, commercials, documentaries, and the well-received feature *Thumbsucker* (2005), Mills is a graphic designer and artist. Wearing the last of these hats, early in 2008 he appropriated a billboard on La Brea Avenue, painted it pink, and then printed on it, "The cops are inside us" in white Helvetica. Shortly afterward, underneath his sententiously vacuous proclamation, an unknown tagger scrawled a reply, "They Ain't Inside Me." As such layered contestations are mobilized more grandly and in moving images, cycles of corporate initiatives and art-world or populist contestations of them, of protest and counter-protest, sustain each other.

A demotic, progressive instance is Phantom Galleries LA. Modeled on a San Jose precedent, the organization arranges for local arts groups, independent curators, and artists to exhibit video and other work in vacant storefront windows, transforming them into 24/7 public art. As well as giving visibility to the art, Phantom Galleries also contributes to urban renewal, encouraging foot traffic, public use of social space, community involvement, and so on. One I saw earlier in the spring, "The Long Weekend," organized by Nancy Buchanan and Joseph Santarromana in a Pasadena shopping district, had taken over a failed furniture store with half a dozen street-level windows. In each had been placed an installation, performance, sculpture, or video projection, all engaging some aspect of the relationship between art and commerce. Buchanan's own, for example, *3 Fates*, presented myth reduced to marketing in filmed images of a fashion model successively draped in three gowns whose various colors—siren-red, prison-jumpsuit orange, and camouflage—hinted at their destiny. The panorama as a whole appeared as a series of adjacent movie screens, in which—appropriately enough—were reflected the marquee lights of Laemmle's first-run arthouse theater on the opposite side of Colorado Boulevard.

At the other pole of both urban development and corporate cultural investment is the new downtown Nokia Theatre L.A. LIVE that opened in October 2007. Inside is devoted to pricey pop music, but outside is a visual spectacle of multicolored pulsating screens that recalls nothing so much as Stan VanDerBeek's Movie Drome projection system or John Cage and Ronald Nameth's 1967–69 performance work, *HPSCHD*—reconceived in hell.

That the site/sight should have been developed by a cell-phone company is precisely appropriate since phones are at present the cutting-edge site for new movie technologies; they have already redirected the structure of music videos away from earlier aspirations to cinematic scale toward simpler images that lose nothing by reduction to phone size. Since, along with other forms of advertising, music videos are the nexus where the avant-garde's formal innovations have been commercially appropriated, a comparison between, for example, Jake Nava's video for Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put A Ring On It)," released in

Nokia Plaza

Photo: Andrew D. Bernstein, Bernstein Associates. Courtesy of AEG. Permissions: Cara Vanderhook for Nokia Theatre L.A. LIVE.

October and ranked as the best 2008 single by *Rolling Stone*, and the Michael Jackson or Madonna videos of twenty years ago gives some indication of where the avant-garde itself is headed. The cell-phone industry's current obsession with mapping which suggests that—just as we now drive using various satellite-navigation systems—we will before long be finding our way on foot through real space by referring to virtual images on our phones. So, if you do go to L.A. LIVE, you may still expect to be jostled by Nokia customers traversing the visual cacophony of the real-space of Nokia Plaza by looking at their phones—unless, that is, they are interrupted by their "Single Ladies" ringtone.

Existing midway between Phantom Galleries and L.A. Live (and the contradictions they respectively embody) was "Women in the City," curated by Emi Fontana," a "viral public art exhibition" of work by Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Jenny Holzer on view at more than fifty locations, including billboards, video screens, storefronts, and a movie theater. Kruger's new video, *Plenty*, which according to the website "appropriates advertisements and stereotypes commenting on consumerism," was presented on video billboards at the flagship Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and also at the ultra-hip Key Club on the Sunset Strip, where it was "screened daily and fragmented between advertisements."[8]

Aren't we all?

This essay is indebted to the students in my fall 2008 USC class on Avant-Garde Film in Los Angeles, especially Heika L. Burnison, Elizabeth Curry, Misa Keelan, Veronica Renov, Anthony C. Rzeteljski, Bryn Silverman, and Robert Wood.

1. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpxMdtEu5cI.
2. *Film Culture* 44 (spring 1967), 70–74.
3. For the film community's response, see latimesblogs.latimes.com/culture-monster/2008/11/redcat–a-theat.html.
4. See jsteinkamp.com/quicktime/html/humerus.html.
5. Dublab's cultural contributions were recognized in an October story in *L.A. Weekly*, the local free paper: blogs.laweekly.com/westcoastsound/dublabs-vision-version-series/w.attheecho.com.
6. *America* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 56.
7. See www.mikemillsweb.com/.
8. Kruger's video can be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0HHOIpUddI&feature=PlayList&p=ED13B213DA577ECA&index=1.

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ABSTRACT Contrary to postmodernist cliché, avant-garde moving image culture is not dead; rather it is ubiquitous, although in intertwined utopian and dystopian forms. A plethora of independent exhibition venues in Los Angeles and indeed the urban fabric of the city sustain unprecedentedly vibrant and complex forms of popular cinema, according to this survey of 2008 events.

KEYWORDS Los Angeles, hipster cinema, avant-garde, exhibition venues, urbanity

A VERY GOOD YEAR

I don't know whether this was the best Cannes ever but it was certainly the best that I have attended in twenty-five years. First of all there were many fewer people. When I first went, in 1985, Cannes already hosted all the film world, the journalists, the festival programmers, the producers and distributors both big and small, the directors, and the stars. But every year as film became more dependent on television and the state, this original population was swelled by television executives and, worse, bureaucrats from every region in Europe that had started up a film fund. Finally, in recent years, as London nightclubs opened temporary branches, there have been huge numbers of young people for whom Cannes in May has absolutely nothing to do with films but is simply the venue of choice to get loaded and laid. Executives, bureaucrats, and liggers all gone, gone with the wind of economic collapse.

The film people were still there, however, and if belts were noticeably being tightened—hotels and apartments available for fewer than the full twelve days of the festival, buyers seeking market passes for one day—there was absolutely no stinting in the quality of films being shown. Indeed Cannes 2009 could be taken as proof that even as videogames displace film as the major form of entertainment, film's position as the global art form remains unchallenged. By one of those coincidences at which history reveals itself, the competition strand this year played host to a group of outstanding directors: Pedro Almodóvar, Jacques Audiard, Ken Loach, Michael Haneke, and, almost like a time-traveling visitor, Alain Resnais. There is no doubt that the most moving moment of the festival was Resnais's reception in the Grand Palais as he arrived to present *Wild Grass* (*Les Herbes folles*). When he entered the cinema, the applause went on forever. As indeed it should. This is the man who first introduced André Bazin to the history of film; the man who made *Les Statues meurent aussi* with Chris Marker and whose *Hiroshima mon amour* altered the artistic ambitions of postwar cinema. *Wild Grass* is a charming middle-aged love story, which weaves its protagonists' lives together with wit, simplicity, and wisdom. However, the last two minutes of the film seem to come from another much more bitter and anguished film and *Wild Grass* demands a second viewing.

Film Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 1, pps 68–70, ISSN 0015-1386, electronic ISSN 1533-8630. © 2009 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2009.63.1.68.

As is often the case at Cannes, old masters competed with newer talents. Andrea Arnold's first film, *Red Road*, was set in Glasgow. Her second, *Fish Tank*, inhabits London's East End. Not the fabled alleys of Whitechapel nor even the familiar parks of Hackney, but even further east where the white working class fled the slums in search of new jobs at Dagenham and the new houses that Harold Macmillan built as Churchill's housing minister between 1951–54. Now, where the edge of London meets the Essex marshes, it is home to the underclass that Thatcher and Blair created. A world of terrible deprivation—deprivation of speech, deprivation of feeling, deprivation of life. Here Arnold finds her teenage heroine Mia (Katie Jarvis), isolated from her peers, rowing constantly with her party-loving single mother and her irritating younger sister. Every conversation is nasty, brutish, and short; Mia tries as hard as possible to be unlikeable. But she is as beautiful as the dawn and as Robbie Ryan's cam-

Alain Resnais

Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

era captures her in her environment, we are irresistibly drawn into her young life. Connor (Michael Fassbender) takes up with Mia's mother and the physical attraction between fifteen-year-old girl and charming hunk is perfectly realized, including a sex scene as moving as it is clichéd. The final scenes of the film are unbearably painful and yet Arnold manages to salvage a credible happy end. *Red Road* was marred by too melodramatic a script; *Fish Tank* effortlessly takes an uneventful story and turns it into gripping cinema. This really is direction of a very high order.

When John Keats died in Rome in 1821 at twenty-five of consumption, he thought himself an abject failure and asked that his grave bear the simple inscription: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." In fact, once dead, both his poetry and the story of his death became staples of the Victorian imagination. Part of that story is the secret engagement to Fanny Brawne, to whom he poured out, in some the greatest letters ever written in English, both his theory of poetry and the ambivalence and ambiguity of his attraction to Brawne. Unfortunately, Jane Campion's biopic of Keats and Brawne, his "bright star," has nothing to do with ambivalence or ambiguity. The love affair does not convince on any level. It is clear that Abbie Cornish, who plays Brawne, has a formidable screen presence, but Ben Whishaw struggles in a role that never begins to capture Keats's obsession with death and his desire to "cease upon the midnight with no pain." *Bright Star* oafishly fails to absorb what might have been learnt from "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the poem that captures most perfectly the poet's ambivalence toward Brawne. I have great difficulty when teaching this poem to make students understand why Keats can prefer the bold lover on the urn who will "never, never" kiss to the "breathing human passion" which "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd," but it can be safely said that Campion's film doesn't even attempt such a difficulty.

There were legitimately high hopes that Campion would find a cinematic style that did not detract from Keats's magical but often disturbing poetry. Instead each gets in the way of the other. I would rather have seen a spare film in the manner of Straub-Huillet than one in which gambolling, trivializing camera movements combine with sentimental line readings. *Bright Star* was funded by the UK Film Council's New Cinema Fund, the institutional successor to the British Film Insititute Production Board. I was head of the Production Board from 1985–89, when we successfully brought historical fictions to Cannes. It was unimaginable then that subsidy could be given to conservative period pieces. The artistic and moral bankruptcy of New Labour's cultural policies is evident in such funding decisions.

Bright Star* (top), *The White Ribbon

Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

One of the weaknesses of recent Cannes has been the lamentable lack of great French films. This year we got not only Resnais but also Audiard's *A Prophet* (*Un prophète*). Although set in a jail, it is a Mafia rather than a prison movie. Its unknown star Tahar Rahim moves from humiliated underling to gang boss in a multilingual haze of violence, in which Corsican and Mahgrebian Arabic jostle with French in a plot which is both complex and gripping. Rahim is set, if I'm any judge, for French superstar status. One who has achieved that over five decades is Johnny Hallyday and he turns in a magnificent performance in Johnnie To's *Vengeance*. I say "performance," but more than anything else what Hallyday lends to this Hong Kong film is his unbelievably ravaged face, on which untold pleasures and vices seem written.

Ken Loach is one of the most accomplished and talented European directors and without doubt the greatest contemporary exponent of the aesthetics of Italian neorealism. However, his films about the past, of which the Palme d'or-winning *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* was a

prime example, are cock-eyed about history and seem dedicated to the celebration of violence. Luckily *Looking for Eric* is about the present and is a wonderful self-help film with Eric Cantona acting as a ghostly life coach to a postman whose family and work relations are in a mess. It's a touching and funny film with a simple ideological message—"the people united will never be defeated"—and it's very good to see a Communist film that one can applaud.

Michael Haneke is a great director and I suspect that *The White Ribbon*, set in a Protestant village in Northern Germany in the year before the outbreak of World War I, is his masterpiece. As I have got older Europe's suicide in 1914 seems more and more the defining historical event of our era, and Haneke's film makes a major contribution to diagnosing Europe's terminal state. As the village disintegrates before our eyes into abuse and cruelty, we are watching not just Germany but Europe; not just one country but a whole ideal of civilization that is about to prove itself a hollow lie.

At one very simple and prosaic level, 2009 proved that Cannes remains the world's pre-eminent film festival, a fortnight which really does offer the best of world cinema. At a more complex level, this year's festival renewed one's faith in the cinema. It was hard to spot themes other than the fact than many of the films were very long and that this must have been the most violent competition ever. But both *A Prophet* and *The White Ribbon* needed two and a half hours to tell their complicated stories, and all one can say about the violence is that reality continues to outstrip its representation by a comfortable distance. Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds* enraged some, particularly Americans, for its portrayal of a U.S. unit behind German lines which engages in indiscriminate torture and murder. Yet, it was difficult to take Tarantino's fable as anything but a prolonged cinematic joke with one or two of the set pieces, particularly Michael Fassbender (again) and a German Gestapo officer in a French bar, destined for film immortality. At the same time the film never amounts to more than the sum of its parts and will leave Tarantino fans hoping that their idol can shake his cinephilia into one more great film.

For there were superb films in Cannes this year and they provided angles on the world with a variety and profusion which suggested that as we enter a period of cultural revaluation, cinema will remain as central as it has ever been to an understanding of ourselves and our world. This would have pleased the ghosts that throng the Croisette. For if you have been coming to Cannes for twenty-five years then it is the dead as well as the living who patrol the seafront. As the sleep ration goes down and the alcohol intake goes up, T. S. Eliot's conversation with the ghost of a dead friend that ends

A Prophet* (top), *Vengeance

Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

"Little Gidding" becomes a daily event. In February Hercules Belleville died (see the obituary I wrote for the *Independent*, March 2). Jeremy Thomas's right-hand man at Recorded Pictures, longtime collaborator of Hal Ashby, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Roman Polanski, Hercules was a close friend. At Cannes, we would phone each other six times a day, censor each other's dress and behavior, exchange gossip, and plot the night ahead. I kept hearing his voice throughout the festival and his final judgment was conclusive: "Great, mate. Just great."

COLIN MACCABE is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. He was executive producer of Isaac Julien's *Young Soul Rebels*, which won the Critics' Week Prize at the 1991 Cannes Film festival.

WORK AESTHETIC

There has been no escaping the financial crisis. Its language is the stuff of daily bulletins here in California, where the state budget calamity has brought it home. Derivatives, subprime loans, bailouts, layoffs, bankruptcies, meltdowns, Ponzi schemes, furloughs, and so on. It is hardly surprising that a number of films shown at the San Francisco Asian American Film Festival (March 12–22) and San Francisco International Film Festival (SIFF, April 23–May 7) deal with work—with employment and with unemployment. At the first of the festivals, Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Tokyo Sonata* and Jia Zhang-ke's *24 City* stood out for this reason and also for their quality. *Tokyo Sonata*'s salaryman loses his job when his firm goes into business with Chinese partners. He begins a ghost life, pretending to go to work before he finally finds employment cleaning at a mall (a relic of the bubble era). Off the clock, he exists between worlds. Jia shows Chinese lives similarly dislodged. *24 City* includes a series of interviews with former workers at a state aircraft factory which is being razed to make room for an upscale apartment complex. Most of the interviewees extol the virtues of the communist system, which now embraces market capitalism. But because actors (notably Joan Chen) at times double for workers in the film, there is an extra sense of uncertainty and dislocation, together with a sense of loss, which connects *24 City* to *Tokyo Sonata*.

Theme and mood recur in two films programmed at the SIFF, Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Still Walking* and Claire Denis's *35 Shots of Rum*, both of which additionally pay tribute to Ozu. In *Still Walking*, a melodrama, a family gathers to commemorate the elder son Junpei's death fifteen years earlier. The occasion is hosted by the ageing parents at their home in Yokohama. They are joined by their surviving, middle-aged children: a daughter married to a car salesman (the couple has two boisterous children) and a second son, Ryota, whose wife is a divorcee with a young son. The family members move in and out of rooms through sliding doors; the architectural play with depth of field characteristic of Ozu's films is also apparent here. The specific reference is *Tokyo Story*. The allusion is underlined by distant trains and the daughter's remark that she would like to build a tatami room. Part of *Still Walking*'s work of mourning relates to Japan of the past, Ozu's Japan, which was often united in the face of external enemies. Here instead there are internal tensions: economic decline, family betrayal, the aggression cloaked by ritual and manners. Loss of work plays a part in this. The patriarch has retired from a modest private medical practice; in this new state of unemployment, discord with his wife (a secret Pachinko addict) grows. In one painful dinner scene, she quietly divulges his womanizing as a kind of riposte to a derisive remark he has made about women's work. But the film's sharpest blow occurs when it comes to Ryota's variety of cheating: he has lied to his parents about a successful career as a restorer of paintings, and lied to his wife about securing publishing contracts. As the film progresses, the mother's carefully choreographed meals less and less effectively hold the family together. Yet kitchen labor receives a kind of screen time that we haven't seen since Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*. *Still Walking* opens with mother and daughter grating turnips; conversations between characters are punctuated with queries and compliments about the meal. It appears that household labor isn't facing retrenchment.

The use of interiors in *35 Shots of Rum* also recalls Ozu. (Denis has acknowledged this homage, which brings her film in step with Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* and Doris Dorrie's *Cherry Blossoms*.) The main space is a high-rise apartment building in the suburbs of Paris, the setting for "banlieu films," shared by Lionel and Josephine. They eat standing up in the kitchen; they go in and out of other rooms and onto a balcony; they emerge into the hallway and the nearby elevator. The camera sometimes stays still in empty corridors, outside closed doors; it dwells on two rice cookers side by side in the kitchen. Several sequences take place in the train Lionel drives. Denis inculcates us into the rhythm of the everyday. Near the film's beginning protracted intercutting between Josephine and Lionel convinced me that they were lovers until it became clear that they are daughter and father. When, sitting in a stairway, Lionel chides his colleague René—who has reached retirement age—for weeping "in front of others" at the prospect of life without his job, I thought for a moment that *they* might be lovers. But this is simply a tender friendship of the kind that is hard to find in cinema. *35 Shots of Rum* undoes normative codes. I recalled the gentle, mundane activities and conversations in *Beau Travail*.

Everything seems to run on time in *35 Shots of Rum*: commuter trains, return journeys home, dinners in the evening, post-dinner smokes. And everybody goes to work: Lionel

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Still Walking

Courtesy of San Francisco Film Society/San Francisco International Film Festival

mans his train; Gabrielle, his neighbor and former lover, drives a cab; his daughter Josephine is a shop girl at a Virgin store after attending school; her boyfriend Noé has prospects in Gabon. Regarding this well-oiled machinery of work, one historical change needs stating: we are in a different world to that pictured in the photograph (analyzed by Roland Barthes in "Myth Today") of black soldiers saluting the colonial French flag.

⁂

As a visitor to the Bay Area, spending a term away from Austin to teach in Berkeley, my viewing patterns have necessarily changed, encompassing the Pacific Film Archive and university screenings as well as the San Francisco festivals. In May, my colleague Jeffrey Skoller screened Ken Jacobs's 2007 digital video *Capitalism: Child Labor* on campus. The film has an extraordinary resonance at the present time. An unidentified photograph from the Depression (when factory-size misery was most photogenic) is ushered into the digital age as a flicker film. The found image is a snapshot of a cavernous factory floor: rows and rows of children, barely in their teens, mind cotton spindles with an adult supervisor close at hand. Through flashing light effects calculated to produce a dizzying sensation in the viewer, Jacobs closes in on details and speedily withdraws: a child's bare feet, another child's blank stare, the supervisor's blatant acknowledgment of the camera's presence, the dark recesses of the shop floor. The nauseating flicker effect is commandeered by Jacobs to suggest the brutalities of capitalism. It is salutary. Again and again news reports of the downward-spiraling stock market have been illustrated by depression-era photographs. (I have particularly noticed newspaper use of Dorothea Lange's 1939 overhead shot of serpentine lines at an unemployment office in San Francisco.) The photos become mere ornament, even nostalgia; Jacobs interrupts this process to achieve a sense of irony and to insist that such images are not the national family album, but rather documents of the hardship and injustice of indentured labor. *Capitalism: Child Labor* reminds us of cinema's long investment in the photogenic potential of labor even as it faces termination in *24 City*, *35 Shots of Rum*, *Still Walking*, and *Tokyo Sonata*.

Thanks to Hamsa Murthy.

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DAVID STERRITT

Carl Theodor Dreyer's "Gertrud": The Moving Word by James Schamus

James Schamus cites a wide array of critics in *Carl Theodor Dreyer's "Gertrud": The Moving Word*, a nimble monograph about the 1964 masterpiece that crowned the career of Carl Theodor Dreyer, the legendary Danish filmmaker. Among them are André Bazin, the great advocate of cinematic realism; David Bordwell, a meticulous analytic scholar; directors Jean-Luc Godard and André Téchiné, who supported the film after its dismally received premiere; and the ubiquitous Slavoj Žižek, whose account of "pleasure in displeasure" helps illuminate both Gertrud's enigmatic psychology and *Gertrud*'s tendency to inspire profoundly mixed feelings—fascination, exasperation, and many points between—in the too-small audience it has gathered over the years.

There's no special reason why Schamus should have mentioned Manny Farber as well, but Dreyer's films have long reminded me of the distinction that critic drew in a 1962 essay (reprinted in his *Negative Space*, Da Capo, 1998) between "termite art" and "white elephant art." The latter type is made by people (for example Antonioni, Truffaut, Tony Richardson) who think of an artwork as "an expensive hunk of well-regulated area" and fear "the potential life, rudeness, and outrageousness" found in authentically thrilling works. Termite art, by contrast, is the invigorating enterprise of "stubbornly self-involved . . . go-for-broke" artists—Laurel and Hardy, Kurosawa in *Ikiru* (1952), Hawks and Faulkner in part of *The Big Sleep* (1946)—who thrive on "buglike immersion in a small area" and "eating away the immediate boundaries of [their] art." Farber's pigeonholes are simplistic, but they have their uses, and I find Dreyer's work in general and *Gertrud* in particular to be termite art of the purest, most admirable kind.

Equally to the point, there are such things as termite critics, and Schamus is an exemplary specimen. Tuning into the same idiosyncratic wavelength as the film, he declares that his book is less about *Gertrud* than about a single moment in it, a "scene, or image" (4) that sums up the "disturbing and inspiring" traits in Dreyer's artistic personality. This is a richly termitesque approach, and Schamus energetically follows through, digging so deeply into his chosen moment that he soon comes out the other side, bringing to light a wealth of oddments that no standard-issue analysis could have collected, organized, and pondered in such creative ways.

For those who haven't yet seen *Gertrud*, here's a quick rundown of the plot, which Dreyer adapted from Hjalmar Söderberg's eponymous play. The heroine, an opera singer, has decided to end her loveless marriage to a government official and run away with Jansson, a romantic young musician. After breaking with her husband and sleeping with Jansson for the first time, she meets with the celebrated poet Lidman, a former lover of hers, who reveals that Jansson is acting like a cad behind her back. Sure enough, Jansson now rejects her, and Gertrud leaves for Paris to join her old friend Nygren, a psychiatrist who paid a call on her in an earlier scene. In an epilogue, Nygren visits Gertrud in her country home decades later, and Gertrud, whose refusal of imperfect love has kept her from any kind of lasting love relationship, reveals the inscription she has chosen for her tombstone: *Amor omnia*. Love is everything.

The privileged moment that Schamus singles out takes place halfway through the story, when Gertrud and Nygren are backstage at a banquet hall, having one of the outwardly formal yet emotionally fraught conversations that make up most of the film. Gertrud has recounted a dream in which she fell prey to wild beasts in a forest, and now she suddenly takes notice of a tapestry on the wall, depicting a nude woman beset by a pack of dogs—the very image, Gertrud says with trepidation, of her alarming nightmare. Schamus takes off from this brief moment like a hermeneutic surfer on a semiotic wave—tracing the tapestry's provenance to Boccaccio's prose and a series of Botticelli paintings; expounding on ekphrasis, the verbal expression of visual phenomena; relating Dreyer's mise-en-scène to fifteenth-century ideas about perspective and narrative in painting; finding parallels between Gertrud's position in the film and the Virgin Mary's shifting position in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation.

And a great deal more, all conjoined by Schamus's basic interpretive tropes. One is the theory that Dreyer's last film was also the last of his many poignant efforts to understand the tragedy of his mother, whom he never knew, an unmarried woman who perished miserably after giving him up for adoption. The other is that Dreyer's *idée fixe* is the set of conflictual relationships between image and word, feminine and masculine, and imaginary and symbolic, which Dreyer alchemically transmutes, via Gertrud, into a pathway to the real. The muses of the book, inevitably, are female: Inger, the woman resurrected from the dead by a fusion of word and flesh in Dreyer's previous film, *Ordet* (1955), and Joan of Arc, whose passion (portrayed in Dreyer's tour de force of 1928)

encroaches on Gertrud and *Gertrud* in more ways than one can count.

Schamus is a true cosmopolite of the movies—an Oscar-nominated producer and screenwriter, the CEO of Focus Features, a Columbia University film professor, and now, it turns out, a first-rate scholarly critic. My only real quarrel with his book is that he overstates the difficulty of delighting in Dreyer's masterpiece, which I find as moving and exhilarating as any movie of the past half-century. Watch it with care, read Schamus's action-packed study, and your cinematic life will be genuinely, and permanently, enriched. © 2009 David Sterritt

DAVID STERRITT is chair of the National Society of Film Critics and professor emeritus at Long Island University.

BOOK DATA James Schamus, *Carl Theodor Dreyer's "Gertrud": The Moving Word*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008. $17.50 paper. 118 pages.

ADRIENNE L. MCLEAN

Brass Diva: The Life and Legends of Ethel Merman **by Caryl Flinn**
Ethel Merman: A Life **by Brian Kellow**

The jacket copy of Caryl Flinn's massive biography of Ethel Merman, *Brass Diva*, claims that the book is "definitive" as well as "the first to tell the full story of how the stenographer from Queens, New York, became the queen of the Broadway musical in its golden age." According to the jacket copy of Brian Kellow's *Ethel Merman*, his book is likewise the "fullest portrait yet of this show-business phenomenon," as well as "the first account of her life to examine both the artist and the woman with as much critical rigor as empathy." Ethel Merman had been the subject of at least three biographies and two "as told to" autobiographies before 2007, and the impetus for the new books seems to have been the forthcoming centennial of Merman's 1908 birth. While the time was certainly ripe for a reappraisal of Merman's life and place in American musical-theater history, one imagines that neither Kellow nor Flinn necessarily intended to produce what *Publishers Weekly* would immediately call "dueling Merman biographies" (November 5, 2007). But dueling they are; and although Flinn's book at 542 pages (including back matter) would seem to be the bigger weapon in comparison to Kellow's 326-page volume, to me the result is a draw.

Flinn, Professor of Women's Studies and Media Arts at the University of Arizona, employs every resource available—archival material, new interviews (including the first with Merman's son), casual conversations with "regular Merman fans as well as detractors" (xiv), and, in what is marketed as the book's biggest treasure trove, Merman's own collection of fifty-plus scrapbooks covering her entire career—to analyze Merman's life and work as well as what Flinn calls Merman's "afterlife" as a mediated and preserved performer, a myth, an icon, and a "queer fantasy" (422–23). Flinn's stated aim is not "to uncover a singular, authentic Ethel Merman—she was too complex a phenomenon for that—but to trace the different Mermans who lived, privately and publicly, for so many Americans across the twentieth century" (xiv). As would be expected of a book published by an academic press, there are many footnotes, and many subheadings within each chapter.

Kellow's book also treats Merman as a complex and contradictory person and star, but in a way that ultimately ties her firmly to the city of New York and the urban melting-pot culture from which she emerged and which would embrace her so heartily when she did. *Ethel Merman* is a "trade book," and there are no footnotes; sources are given at the end only for direct quotations in the text. Nevertheless, Kellow, who is the features editor of *Opera News*, also has interviewed a number of Merman's friends and associates, and utilizes much of the same research material as Flinn in his discussion of Merman's life and career. In contrast to *Brass Diva*, Kellow's book has no introduction proper and, more disconcertingly, no chapter titles. After a couple of evocative opening paragraphs in which he describes the Broadway and New York into which Ethel Agnes Zimmermann was born, Kellow begins what is a largely straightforward chronological rendering of the events and situations of Merman's existence on and, to a lesser extent, away from the stage and screen.

As several reviewers have already noted, a problem for any Merman biographer is that, despite her enormous voice and vibrant energy onstage, Merman herself was not inordinately interesting. She claimed never to have read a book, paid little attention to events that did not directly concern her, was supported in all her endeavors by her adored and adoring parents, was nice to some people and mean to others, had lots of enemies and just as many devoted friends. She had four husbands, the fourth marriage (to Ernest Borgnine) represented famously in the second of Merman's autobiographies by a single blank page. She had two children, one of whom, her daughter Ethel, Jr., was troubled and died of an accidental overdose of pills and alcohol in 1967. And, of course, Merman had what Flinn recounts as "a genuine 'inner yearning' for the love and stability that a conventional family life and an authoritative husband were supposed to provide" (115). But the star who wants to achieve domestic as well as professional success, as with the star who embodies opposing qualities or lives in contradictory ways (as Merman

encroaches on Gertrud and *Gertrud* in more ways than one can count.

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As several reviewers have already noted, a problem for any Merman biographer is that, despite her enormous voice and vibrant energy onstage, Merman herself was not inordinately interesting. She claimed never to have read a book, paid little attention to events that did not directly concern her, was supported in all her endeavors by her adored and adoring parents, was nice to some people and mean to others, had lots of enemies and just as many devoted friends. She had four husbands, the fourth marriage (to Ernest Borgnine) represented famously in the second of Merman's autobiographies by a single blank page. She had two children, one of whom, her daughter Ethel, Jr., was troubled and died of an accidental overdose of pills and alcohol in 1967. And, of course, Merman had what Flinn recounts as "a genuine 'inner yearning' for the love and stability that a conventional family life and an authoritative husband were supposed to provide" (115). But the star who wants to achieve domestic as well as professional success, as with the star who embodies opposing qualities or lives in contradictory ways (as Merman

manifestly did), is already a cliché of stardom itself. Flinn's book, more than Kellow's, often comes across as an attempt to argue for a position that no one, surely, would ever contest: that Ethel Merman was several things at once, did not always act consistently or predictably, was a sometimes conflicted person as well as persona.

Flinn's book is also marked by frequent asides about her own feelings toward Merman, and numerous rhetorical questions that sometimes seem like digressions ("Why has no one made a musical out of [Ethel's story]? If New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia got one, why not Ethel Merman?" [35] —this in a discussion of Merman's sensational Broadway debut in the 1930 Gershwin musical *Girl Crazy*; or, "Ethel never unlearned [her] self-conscious, performative delivery. Why should she?" [131]). This makes *Brass Diva*, despite its abundance of footnotes and detail, much the more personal and idiosyncratic book; whether one appreciates the digressive structure in a volume of such length (and heft) is probably a matter of taste, but I feel that Flinn's book provides not too much information but too much of the *same* information. She refers several times to the "paradox" of Merman's image, eventually posing, in reference to perhaps Merman's most famous stage role, that of Mama Rose in *Gypsy* (1959–61), another rhetorical question: "Rose was everything that Ethel Merman was assumed to be at this point in her career: brash, vulgar, obsessed by her career, and oblivious to the feelings of others. Merman's determination and drive, her rough mouth and tough style were the 'real' Ethel Merman, right?" (319). Does Flinn mean to refer to *Mama Rose*'s determination and drive, rough mouth, and tough style here? If not, then Flinn seems to be saying that Mama Rose *was* the "'real' Ethel Merman." And in fact, while Merman did become imprisoned by an image that was much less complex than the woman herself and was a more versatile performer than she is often given credit for, there are few stars of which the same could not also be said. Flinn wants Merman to be more unusual, more singular, than she would be in the context of other stars and their lives and careers, even if they, like Merman, were also wildly talented artists.

There are several different Mermans in Kellow's book, too, and when he presents a version of some event that the evidence suggests must be apocryphal or hyperbolic, he will point this out. But overall his authorial strategy is to recede into the background and to present a sequential narrative of names, dates, places, and anecdotes, punctuated by often gripping discussions of Merman's performances and how her style and talent interacted with the larger context of the culture of show business. In essence, Kellow writes about Merman as an ordinary person of extraordinary musical performing talent and ability, and seldom tries to justify either her displays of temperament or occasional cruelty as anything but typical of the fear of failure, personal and professional, that show business engenders in many big stars. Merman was often jealous of co-stars (the story Kellow recounts about Merman's fury over Fernando Lamas's tight white pants on-stage—and what they were being worn to accentuate—during the run of *Happy Hunting* in 1956–57 is hilarious [164–65]), and did get several performers fired from the choruses of her shows, but she could also be kind and supportive to younger performers, especially. Near the end of the book, Kellow is particularly fine on Broadway's changing economics, the effect on singers like Merman of the "miked" show, and the move away from light musical comedy and "great old-fashioned star vehicles" toward the rock musical and the "new kind of show" inaugurated by Stephen Sondheim's *Company* in 1970 (222–25). A revival of *Hello, Dolly!* that closed the same year turned out to be Merman's last Broadway "book show" before her death in 1984 of a brain tumor.

Of course, the Merman that most of us know now is the Merman of a handful of films and television shows—with some familiar with her only through her stint on *The Love Boat* as Gopher's Mom in the 1970s or her cameo as Lieutenant Hurwitz in *Airplane!* in 1980—and both scholars provide interesting discussions of her film career and why she never conquered Hollywood the way she did Broadway. For Kellow, it was not just that, as legend has it, Merman was "too big for the screen"; rather, in the movies, she "didn't show many signs of inner life. She spit out her lines and threw herself at the camera, instead of letting it come to her" (71). And as Flinn's consideration of Merman's legacy makes clear, the movie Merman—particularly the boisterous and broadly bawdy Merman of the 1953 film version of Irving Berlin's *Call Me Madam*, in which she had starred on Broadway, or the loud, bossy, and vulgar mother-in-law of 1963's *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*—became the version that ultimately defined, and confined, the woman herself.

The cumulative effect of the dueling Merman biographies may be fairly said to resemble that of long exposure to Merman herself: you recognize the brilliance—and both books are brilliant in their own way—but after a while the experience is overwhelming and a little tiring. The books are well researched, beautifully illustrated, and sometimes breathtakingly entertaining. The format of Flinn's book can make the narrative seem muddled and unclear, while Kellow's lack of chapter titles means one has to rely on a "names and titles only" index to find a specific section. Other reviews have pointed out some errors in the Flinn book—in

the same paragraph about *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*, she both refers to the film's producers as United Artists and as Universal (333), and there are some other small mistakes that, in a work of such scope, are probably inevitable—but she performs an important service by exposing Merman's battering and abuse at the hands of her third husband, Robert Six; he even beat her elderly parents and Merman's children as well, a topic that Kellow does not mention. Neither does a good job of explaining how Merman could be under "exclusive contract" to Warner Bros. but make all but one of her early shorts for Paramount. But of course, if you are a really big Ethel Merman fan, you will have to read both books anyway, and will have a fabulous time in either case. © 2009 Adrienne L. McLean

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MARTIN FRADLEY

Science Fiction Cinema: Between Fantasy and Reality by Christine Cornea

Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film by Adilifu Nama

Christine Cornea's *Science Fiction Cinema* undertakes an ambitious historical survey of the science-fiction film in different national and cultural contexts. Cornea is careful to repeatedly emphasize the broad variety of transnational traditions and influences which commingle in the genre. Unconventionally for a scholarly tome, the volume includes a series of lively interviews with significant SF practitioners, including such luminaries as William Gibson, Roland Emmerich, effects technician Stan Winston, and the characteristically forthright Paul Verhoeven. An introductory volume clearly aimed at an undergraduate audience, *Science Fiction Cinema* takes a chronological approach. Beginning with literary origins, Cornea moves to cinematic prototypes from *Voyage to the Moon* (1902) to *Metropolis* (1927), before crossing the Atlantic to discover incarnations of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon in print, radio, and cinema serials. The study begins in earnest with the SF boom during its so-called Golden Age in the 1950s, and here Cornea follows in the productively revisionist footsteps of Mark Jancovich's *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester University Press, 1996) by guiding her analysis away from the genre's alleged contemporaneous preoccupation with nuclear age angst and anti-Communist paranoia. Instead, *Science Fiction Cinema* explores the domestic discontent obliquely registered in American films of the era before discussing the influence of Japan's *Gojira* (1954) and the British *Quatermass* films from 1955 onward. Films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) in the 1960s and 70s are classified in terms of a "maturation" of the genre, the fantastical and speculative projections of SF combining with the influence of European arthouse cinema to make a genre fit for an emerging counterculture. These progressive shifts are subsequently vaporized by the sweeping ray gun of Reaganite "backlash" conservatism in the 1980s, though Cornea notes that gender dynamics of films as diverse in tone as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Starship Troopers* (1997) continue to be oppositional or radical.

And herein lies the conundrum of *Science Fiction Cinema*. As a teacher, I struggle to think of a more succinct and clearly written single-volume introduction to the genre; as a scholar and aficionado, however, I found myself wanting to read something that made me look at these well-known films in new ways. In this respect, I was mostly disappointed, although toward the book's end there are two excellent chapters. One is on representations of race and ethnicity, and it contains incisive commentary on a wide range of films, including iconic SF cycles such as the Black Power-era *Planet of the Apes* (1968–73) series and the multiculturalism and techno-Orientalism of *The Matrix* (1999–2003) franchise. The other is a discussion of "posthuman" subjectivity and cyborg performativity in David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) and *eXistenZ* (1999); here, at last, the author really comes to grips with the material in an original and highly sophisticated way. Though some readers may be alienated by the conflation of game theory and esoteric conceptual speculation here, others will be thrilled (as I was) by Cornea's nuanced analysis of the "constantly emerging techno-human" (238).

"Race," asserts Adilifu Nama, "is the ultimate science fiction" (42). Alluding quite unambiguously to the manner in which essentialist social constructions of "race" invariably rely upon a dubious conflation of quasi-scientific jargon and neo-Darwinist rhetoric, the author of *Black Space* underscores the way SF reflects painful historical realities. Tracing the evolution of the American SF film from the emergence of the Civil Rights movement through to the present day, Nama examines the genre's shifting allegorical stagings of collective fears, fantasies, and desires surrounding race in American society. Seeing SF's progressive potential as indica-

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tive of American culture's speculative capacity to reimagine itself, *Black Space* depicts such futuristic projections as always already caught between the utopian imagination and the inevitable social limitations of the present. As the author notes, "If we cannot look toward the future to imagine new possibilities and solutions for a history of race relations marred with fear, violence, institutional discrimination, and deep-seated ambivalence, then where else?" (172).

Black Space is for the most part unapologetically polemical. At its best, this approach can be persuasive and compelling. For example, Nama finds in the overwhelming prevalence of white characters in SF cinema a "symbolic wish-fulfilment of America's staunchest advocates of white supremacy" (10). Until the 1970s, the idea of African Americans in space—and, by extension, equal citizens in a socially just democracy—seemed simply too far-fetched to mainstream audiences, even allowing for SF's ostensibly unconfined scope for futuristic fantasy. Much of Nama's broad-ranging survey is preoccupied with the frustrating limitations of SF in terms of racial representation. *Star Wars* is roundly and succinctly denounced as "elevating white nationalism to the level of a cathartic morality tale" (31), while the reactionary politics and disturbingly Caucasian universe of *Logan's Run* (1976) and dubious neoconservative agenda of *Gattaca* (1997) are similarly critiqued. To underscore the genre's often depressingly limited racial imagination, the author points to the enormous popularity of Will Smith. While Nama duly credits the star of *Independence Day* (1996), *Men in Black* (1997), *I, Robot* (2004), and *I Am Legend* (2007) with significantly heightening the black presence in SF cinema, Smith is also pithily described as an icon of assimilation, his persona successfully blending "the racially nonthreatening posture of Sidney Poitier with the charismatic bravado of Eddie Murphy" (39). For Nama, Smith's SF roles function as a convenient corrective to fears about domestic racial dissent and, in turn, as symbols of patriotic solidarity and reassuring post-9/11 national consensus.

Black Space sometimes overstates the case against Hollywood SF. While the all-white future of *When Worlds Collide* (1951) is certainly indicative of the era's widespread racism, it is nevertheless something of a leap to argue that the film is therefore a direct expression of white supremacism. Furthermore, "alien-ness" is a more malleable trope than *Black Space* often allows for, and Nama's reductive tendency to elide the strategic ambiguities of Hollywood entertainment is not without its problems. It is certainly true that *War of the Worlds* (2005) is rife with visual references to 9/11, but Nama's pigeonholing of the film as unthinkingly anti-Islamic seems too much. Much like the nightmarish urban warzone of *Cloverfield* (2008), Spielberg's depiction of senseless mass slaughter can also be read as an empathetic portrayal of the ground-level experience of "Shock and Awe"-style atrocities. Elaborate critical pirouettes are required elsewhere to argue that *The Thing* (1982) advocates eugenics, or that *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999) is the SF equivalent of Richard J. Hernstein and Charles Murray's incendiary 1996 book about intelligence, *The Bell Curve*. Overall, a certain humourlessness certainly characterizes *Black Space*, and one only has to compare Nama's contemptuous dismissal of irreverence in *The Fifth Element* (1997) with Cornea's more compelling celebration of that film's endorsement of cultural hybridity to get a sense that *Black Space* suffers from a degree of inflexible overseriousness. (On a related point of cross-cultural misrecognition: while Nama is absolutely right to emphasize the overdetermined status of a chained and infected black English soldier in *28 Days Later* [2003], I can assure the author that viewers in the U.K. would be considerably more likely to understand this scene as a condemnation of institutional racism in the British military rather than as an evocation of "the historical use of black men in America as human guinea pigs to observe the effects of syphilis" [65].)

Much more intriguing are those sections where *Black Space* deftly explores the progressive potential of SF cinema. Nama's analysis of the ambivalent exploration of interracial desire in *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), the proto-integrationist politics of *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964), and the "Afrofuturism" of blaxploitation epic *Space is the Place* (1974) are exemplary in this respect. Elsewhere, a nuanced revisionist analysis of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) salvages Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams) from accusations of tokenism, and finds in the film a sophisticated allegory of the conflicted racial dilemmas faced by an upwardly mobile black middle class. Nama also offers original commentary on the cross-race alliances and shifting class/gender dynamics in the *Alien* (1979–97) franchise, while the post-industrial nightmare of *Robocop* (1987)—set in Detroit—is celebrated for its dystopian satire of blue-collar decline. Nama is also refreshingly uninhibited by any search for authorial consistency: while Tim Burton's remake of *Planet of the Apes* (2001) is savagely condemned for its racial politics, *Mars Attacks!* (1996) is acclaimed for its sustained critique of SF's persistent marginalization of black characters. Similarly, John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988) is hailed for its "radical" depiction of cross-race working-class solidarity while *Escape from New York* (1981) is viewed as a neo-racist vision of a self-destructive black populace. Yet in the optimistic fervor that prevails as I write this—shortly after the election of

the first black U.S. president—*Black Space* seems curiously like *retro*-futurism. While one should be cautious about any naively utopian "post-racial" rhetoric, one can only hope that—with this sense of future shock intact—we truly are beginning to live in a science-fiction present. © 2009 Martin Fradley

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STEPHEN B. ARMSTRONG

After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality
ed. David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer

Hitchcock and the Methods of Suspense
by William Hare

In *Hitchcock and the Methods of Suspense*, film historian William Hare considers the cultural contexts in which Alfred Hitchcock worked and how they may have affected the way he made his films. A series of anecdotal vignettes and production histories, this sprawling survey charts the creation of some of the director's best-known works, including *Notorious* (1946), *North by Northwest* (1959), and the underrated *Family Plot* (1976). Hare speculates, for example, that new concerns about the environment, popularized by the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, may have influenced Hitchcock and screenwriter Evan Hunter when they prepared their script for *The Birds* (1963). "With the massive attention given to Carson's best-seller," Hare argues, "along with the attendant international publicity concerning her well-publicized congressional testimony, interviews and lectures, it would be virtually inconceivable for her viewpoint and widely expressed concepts to escape Hitchcock's consciousness" (276). Too often, however, Hare devotes his attention to material which has been covered at length elsewhere, in particular the well-known story of David O. Selznick's strained relationship with Hitchcock and the manner in which the producer introduced his own interests and neuroses into films like *Rebecca* (1940), *The Paradine Case* (1947), and especially *Spellbound* (1945), which reflected Selznick's new fascination with psychoanalysis. Free of difficult theoretical concepts and claims, Hare's book may not be particularly groundbreaking, but it is readable and informative, making it a good resource for people coming to the director's films for the first time.

Hitchcock's ability to draw customers into theaters helped to make him one of the most admired and powerful figures working in Hollywood. And as a result, his films and his approaches to direction have been studied and copied by innumerable directors. For David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer, the extent of Hitchcock's influence on the style, structure, and content of other filmmakers' work, however, "is an often acknowledged, but as yet largely unexamined fact" (2). To correct this, they have published *After Hitchcock*, a collection of thirteen original essays that considers the ways in which the director's signature themes and techniques have been appropriated by directors as various as Jonathan Demme, Pedro Almodóvar, and Kenneth Branagh.

The collection opens with an essay by Constantine Verevis that considers *Psycho* (1960) and its numerous sequels and knock-offs. The author focuses at first on Gus Van Sant's shot-for-shot 1998 remake, a picture many reviewers dismissed as "an attempt to exploit the original film's legendary status" and "the defilement of a beloved classic" (15). But, as Verevis points out, imitations of *Psycho* have existed for nearly as long as the film itself. The "massive domestic and international success" (19) which the movie initially enjoyed at the box office prompted an immediate wave of imitative thrillers like William Castle's *Homicidal* (1961) and J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear* (1962). And in the 1970s and 80s, the original picture again served as a model for numerous "slasher" movies, including *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), which inspired their own imitations. In the 1980s, as well, several official *Psycho* sequels were produced by Universal, with Anthony Perkins reprising his role as Norman Bates. This long sequence of derivative productions calls into question any claims that Van Sant's remake is somehow exceptional. As Verevis argues, "*Psycho* 98—indeed, all of the *Psycho* remakes—draw attention to the very nature of cinema, to the nature of cinematic quotation and cultural production, to the fact that every film . . . is a type of remaking" (28). Even the original *Psycho*, Verevis notes, isn't entirely original; the film contains structural elements and themes which Hitchcock had worked with earlier in *Stage Fright* (1949), *I Confess* (1953), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

In "Shadows of *Shadow of a Doubt*," Adam Knee explores the intertextual links that exist between Hitchcock's 1943 thriller and a pair of low-budget remakes both released in 1958, *Step Down to Terror* and *The Return of Dracula*. The latter is of particular interest to Knee, who analyzes the ways

the first black U.S. president—*Black Space* seems curiously like *retro*-futurism. While one should be cautious about any naively utopian "post-racial" rhetoric, one can only hope that—with this sense of future shock intact—we truly are beginning to live in a science-fiction present. © 2009 Martin Fradley

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Hitchcock's ability to draw customers into theaters helped to make him one of the most admired and powerful figures working in Hollywood. And as a result, his films and his approaches to direction have been studied and copied by innumerable directors. For David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer, the extent of Hitchcock's influence on the style, structure, and content of other filmmakers' work, however, "is an often acknowledged, but as yet largely unexamined fact" (2). To correct this, they have published *After Hitchcock*, a collection of thirteen original essays that considers the ways in which the director's signature themes and techniques have been appropriated by directors as various as Jonathan Demme, Pedro Almodóvar, and Kenneth Branagh.

The collection opens with an essay by Constantine Verevis that considers *Psycho* (1960) and its numerous sequels and knock-offs. The author focuses at first on Gus Van Sant's shot-for-shot 1998 remake, a picture many reviewers dismissed as "an attempt to exploit the original film's legendary status" and "the defilement of a beloved classic" (15). But, as Verevis points out, imitations of *Psycho* have existed for nearly as long as the film itself. The "massive domestic and international success" (19) which the movie initially enjoyed at the box office prompted an immediate wave of imitative thrillers like William Castle's *Homicidal* (1961) and J. Lee Thompson's *Cape Fear* (1962). And in the 1970s and 80s, the original picture again served as a model for numerous "slasher" movies, including *Halloween* (1978) and *Friday the 13th* (1980), which inspired their own imitations. In the 1980s, as well, several official *Psycho* sequels were produced by Universal, with Anthony Perkins reprising his role as Norman Bates. This long sequence of derivative productions calls into question any claims that Van Sant's remake is somehow exceptional. As Verevis argues, "*Psycho* 98—indeed, all of the *Psycho* remakes—draw attention to the very nature of cinema, to the nature of cinematic quotation and cultural production, to the fact that every film . . . is a type of remaking" (28). Even the original *Psycho*, Verevis notes, isn't entirely original; the film contains structural elements and themes which Hitchcock had worked with earlier in *Stage Fright* (1949), *I Confess* (1953), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

In "Shadows of *Shadow of a Doubt*," Adam Knee explores the intertextual links that exist between Hitchcock's 1943 thriller and a pair of low-budget remakes both released in 1958, *Step Down to Terror* and *The Return of Dracula*. The latter is of particular interest to Knee, who analyzes the ways

in which it not only echoes but also departs from Hitchcock's film. In both pictures, sinister figures exploit the good will and affection of relatives and friends; and over the course of each, the true nature of these charming, but murderous, characters comes to the surface, prompting the people who once loved them to destroy them. Knee explains that this scenario allowed Hitchcock "to darkly suggest [that] the potential [for evil] exists in all of us, lurks [even] behind the scrubbed-clean façade of small-town America" (56). *The Return of Dracula* characterizes evil in a considerably different manner, however. Rather than it being an expression of weakness or "mental imbalance" as we find in Hitchcock's film, evil is something which can be transmitted and spread, much like a disease or, in the context of this movie, vampirism. Knee suggests that Dracula should here be likened to a "foreign, invading agent" (55), understood allegorically as a Cold War communist, whose presence threatens to undermine American society.

In addition to offering comprehensive analyses of individual films, several essays in *After Hitchcock* survey the careers of directors whose output has been significantly shaped by their admiration for the Master of Suspense. In "How to Steal from Hitchcock," Thomas M. Leitch considers Brian De Palma, a director who "has been variously characterized as a Hitchcock imitator, a creator of Hitchcock homages, an acolyte, an heir apparent, a parasite, a scavenger, and a thief" (251). While the recurring depiction of voyeurism in his films, for example, brings movies like *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958) to mind, the shower scenes that appear in *Phantom of the Paradise* (1974), *Carrie* (1976), and *Scarface* (1983) demonstrably point back to *Psycho*. Leitch argues that to a certain extent these "blatant and repeated thefts from the master" are derivative, but, at the same time, "the texts of his films ... take extraordinary pains to emphasize every point at which his material is stolen from Hitchcock . . . In this regard, De Palma's thefts go beyond derivations, beyond even allusions, and become directorial signatures" (258).

In "Red Blood on White Bread," Richard Neupert looks at several suspense films directed by Claude Chabrol. A contributor to *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, Chabrol was one of the first critics to recognize Hitchcock as an important filmmaker and his admiration has colored his own cinematic output. Neupert writes: "Chabrol has consistently been the director most clearly influenced by Hitchcock, in part because he tells so many domestic crime stories, but also because of his exploration of guilt, eroticism, and point-of-view structures" (134). The French director's indebtedness to Hitchcock is especially apparent in *Le Boucher* (1970), a film in which a somewhat likeable protagonist—much like the antiheroes in *Psycho* and *Shadow of a Doubt*—has a fondness for murdering women. Unlike Hitchcock, however, Chabrol has never been pressured to impose happy endings upon his films, and thus they retain, as Neupert claims, "the perverse sense of fate and even humor that Hitchcock [working in Hollywood] often had to renounce or repress" (142).

R. Barton Palmer, however, suggests in "The Hitchcock Romance and the '70s Paranoid Thriller" that the director's view of life was ultimately optimistic and this sensibility consistently permeates his films. Palmer surveys, in particular, the director's numerous thrillers, and finds that even in pictures as dark as *Vertigo*, Hitchcock's heroes almost always possess a degree of "power and freedom" which allows them to pursue and frequently achieve whatever goals they might have before them. To support this claim, Palmer directs our attention to a pair of political thrillers from 1974—*The Parallax View* and *The Conversation*—which "in terms of narrative pattern . . . [are] thoroughly Hitchcockian" (85). Much as we find in pictures like *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *North by Northwest*, the heroes in these films stumble onto dangerous, anti-democratic conspiracies. But unlike Hitchcock's protagonists, who ultimately expose and defeat the conspirators, Alan J. Pakula's and Francis Ford Coppola's heroes are defeated, forced to "discover that they dispose of no real power to act—and that such freedom as they once had has been taken from them." These "paranoid thrillers," as Palmer labels them, "pose Hitchcockian problems," but they lack "Hitchcockian solutions." As a result, they present "a darker, collective vision of human (im)possibility than the master of suspense ever thought to bring to the screen" (106).

Quantifying and qualifying the influence one of the world's most popular directors has had upon the cinema is an enormous undertaking, "an impossible task for any one volume" (10), Boyd and Palmer admit in their introduction. By and large, though, the essays collected in *After Hitchcock* serve as a more than adequate—and enjoyable—entrée to this dizzying topic. © 2009 Stephen B. Armstrong

STEPHEN B. ARMSTRONG is Assistant Professor of English at Dixie State College of Utah and author of *Pictures About Extremes: The Films of John Frankenheimer* (McFarland, 2008).

BOOK DATA David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer (eds), *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation, and Intertextuality*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006. $55.00 cloth; $22.95 paper. 290 pages.

William Hare, *Hitchcock and the Methods of Suspense*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007. $39.95 paper. 360 pages.

MARCIA BUTZEL

Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema, ed. Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson

The subject of this admirable collection is neo-realism's interaction with the film traditions of other national/cultural identities worldwide. Beginning with Jaimey Fisher's study of the German "rubble film" of 1945–51, the volume proceeds with essays on neo-realism in Czechoslovakia, India, Colombia, Brazil, sub-Saharan Africa, and Hong Kong, returning home with its last several essays on Europe. The "rough chronological" organization allows readers to observe evolution and make use of temporal reference points, but without expecting that a clear cause-and-effect line of development exists. With Italian neo-realism as a regular referent, the volume coheres more than other edited collections on world cinema. It risks some tedium, though, when read straight through as a whole, since the Italian movement is summarized in many essays, and most contributors restrict examples from the movement to the most canonical films.

This is not to say that the authors make identical use of neo-realism, nor that they understand it in the same way. The Italian movement was never organized by a manifesto; its rationales—theorized after the movement's dissolution—vary. The essays here render the full range of aesthetic, ethical, epistemological, and historical claims. Offered as well are more substantial treatments of influence than the cursory statements of filmmakers and many film history surveys provide. For example, Lubica Ucník situates neo-realism's importance to Czech New Wave cinema by documenting how in the mid-1950s, the Prague film academy allowed the Italian films onto the curriculum. Though the films could be read as "revealing the unethical capitalist exploitation of the masses to lucky workers living under socialism" (59), what the filmmakers-in-training saw in neo-realism was a way to critique Stalinist reality. In its Czech translation an ethical/political method rather than an aesthetic, neo-realism recurs elsewhere, too, as "the creation of a space by and for filmmakers to account for the ethical freedom of the individual in the face of the overwhelming reality of globalization" (55).

Moinak Biswas meaningfully complicates issues of influence and assimilation. The Italian films and Satyajit Ray's corresponding *Pather Panchali* (1955) were greeted as "the expression of modernity against the so-called backward practices of popular [Indian] cinema" (73), yet Indian postcolonial critics would subsequently question neo-realism's offer of a break with tradition. Biswas steps aside from both critical positions. Examining the Indian "social" film (realist melodrama) in the calamitous 1940s and early 50s, he makes the fascinating case that a "neorealist aspiration" became increasingly apparent in Indian cinema itself. The arrival of Italian neo-realist films in India was a dialogic encounter, and neo-realism's assimilation was strategic, "one of the ways Indian cinema entered a global affiliation; it found an alternative mode of becoming part of world cinema—a globalism different from the one created across nations by Hollywood" (85).

Other essays are alert to a neo-neo-realism in contemporary international cinema. For Kristi M. Wilson, Víctor Gaviria's Colombian film about a group of young men in Medellin's slums, *Rodrigo D: No Future* (1990) is best understood "in dialogue with" Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952), the film regarded as ending the neo-realist movement. *Rodrigo D*, though, is evidence of "the ongoing importance of the neorealist mode of production to contemporary Latin American depictions of poverty, underdevelopment, and global capitalism" (146). A controversial aspect of neo-realism in Italy (narrative closure without social remedy) instead became effective for New Latin American cinema's emphasis on activist spectatorship.

Millicent Marcus expertly reveals in recent Italian anti-Mafia martyr films an undiscussed quality of canonic neo-realism: its "memorialist impulse." As in the Po River sequence of *Paisan* (1946), when the dead partisan is buried in the dunes, the sign condemning him now honorably used to mark the grave, Rossellini's first neo-realist films may be considered epitaphs, "writing on tombs." Linked by Marcus to a nineteenth-century Italian literary tradition of activist commemoration, these are not laments, but vigorous inspirations for political engagement, present and future. In the recent films, neo-realism itself "has been invoked as a sepulchral text—one that marks the death of a movement in film historical terms but enjoins future generations to continue its legacy of politically engaged art" (303).

Thomas Stubblefield deals with *Elephant* (2003), Gus Van Sant's conjecture about the Columbine shootings, as a pastiche of Deleuzian neo-realism. The film seems to recreate the condition of neo-realist spectatorship—the hope that the witness, through the power of the gaze, will make sense of an otherwise incomprehensible situation. However, *Elephant* is a pastiche, not a re-creation, of neo-realism. It may be read in relation to Deleuze's crisis of the "action image," but the film's postmodern aesthetics intervene in the attempt at a "pure optical image," failing to clarify the tragedy.

Ultimately, *Elephant* "functions as a form of ceremonial mourning for its own lost present, a presence that might have somehow allowed the tragedy to be averted or at least provide answers as to why it occurred in the first place" (237).

Marcus's thesis on neo-realism's memorialist function comes to mind here, the connection accentuating how estranged *Elephant* is from a tradition of epitaphic inspiration to political action and moral engagement. But one may also consider *Rodrigo D*'s relationship to this tradition, expecting some appropriation, but also local inflections. Enabling connections like these to be explored, crossing essays and continents, this valuable collection affirms that world cinema surely exists as a critical perspective. © 2009 Marcia Butzel

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BOOK DATA Laura E. Ruberto and Kristi M. Wilson (eds), *Italian Neorealism and Global Cinema*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007. $28.95 paper. 360 pages.

R. BARTON PALMER

Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From "Gone with the Wind" to "The Passion of the Christ" by Thomas Leitch

Though "one of the oldest areas of film studies," with its roots in some of the writings by classic film theorists, adaptation theory, Thomas Leitch concedes, has had "little influence" on either the discipline in general or, more surprisingly, "discussions of contemporary film adaptations by literary scholars" (1). Only recently have film scholars such as James Naremore and most prominently Robert Stam shown any real interest in this area. Leitch reminds us that studies of adaptation "tend to privilege literature in two ways": by organizing such explorations around films made from the works of canonical authors and thus by establishing "literature as a proximate cause of adaptation that makes fidelity to the source text central to the field" (3).

Film Adaptation and Its Discontents launches a frontal assault with wit and great learning on the fetishization of fidelity. This book would be of interest if it did no more than explore what Leitch describes as the "specific problems adaptations raise," including (in a marvelous chapter on the silent cinema) the formal difficulties involving in lending "epic scope" to two-reeler versions of literary classics like *Enoch Arden* and, in a chapter that intriguingly cuts across the lines of national cinemas and production eras, an anatomizing of three distinct "traditions of quality." Leitch, however, deploys to good effect not only the impressive critical and taxonomic skills he has demonstrated elsewhere, but something of an evangelistic zeal: an advocacy for this field that addresses not only his peers in literary and film studies, but those in higher education more generally. In chapter 1, Leitch engages with two scholars who have sought to transform school curricula, E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Peter Elbow, to argue for making adaptation study one of the cornerstones of university education: literacy. For Leitch, this goal of fostering literacy is best served by a kind of Deweyesque active engagement in rewriting, for which adaptation serves as a useful model: "Adaptation study has unique potential as the keystone of a new discipline of textual studies less ideologically driven, and therefore more powerful, than either contemporary literary or cultural studies" (20).

And so the chapters that follow are intended not only to help reshape the field, but also to provide "examples of rewriting that can inspire storytellers and analysts alike to their own productive and inevitable rewriting of everything they need not and cannot simply read" (21). The mantra of such a revisionist version of literary and cinematic study would be: "The text is dead. Long live the text" (20).

It would be wonderful to have students engage in some form of rewriting assigned texts rather than producing critical essays. But, even as someone with a deep interest in the field, I had to wonder at the intellectual point of this discussion, for surely Barthes and Bakhtin have already demonstrated that a primal textual quality is "answerability" or an inviting openness to that revising reply of which adaptation must be seen as one important sort. Hasn't our classroom discussion, like our writing, moved beyond the concept of impermeable and unrewritable textual boundaries?

In any case, the reformism of the book's first chapter gives way to more traditional—and welcome—forms of analysis in those that follow. These do not follow any discernible scheme, being bound together only by a consistent focus. A certain unevenness is the inevitable result. Chapter 6, devoted to "Exceptional Fidelity," with an otherwise interesting in-depth treatment of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–03) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), makes a banal point, namely that for different reasons film productions sometimes have to hew closely to principles of fidelity. Chapter 5, "Between Adaptation and Allusion," promises a theoretical discussion of the difference between these two categories of intertextual gestures, but is instead mainly concerned to meditate on adaptation taxonomy (building a scheme, based mainly on other theorists, that Leitch playfully then deconstructs).

A quibble I had with the book as a whole is that it never unpacks the term "adaptation" in order to discuss such key issues as identity (to what extent an adaptation must share the identity of its source to be an adaptation) and reach (how much of a source text an adaptation must recycle in order to be called an adaptation). Gérard Genette's theory of "transtextuality" is briefly invoked, for example, but the

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key concept of that theory (the problematic notion of the "ties" between genetically related texts) is not discussed. Such theoretical issues are treated more consistently and at greater length in Julie Sanders's useful recent book, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Routledge, 2005). Leitch might have been better advised not to raise them.

Film Adaptation and Its Discontents is a worthy and distinctive entrant into an already crowded field. Its strengths lie in the detailed and persuasively argued collective case histories (the Sherlock Holmes films, productions based on comic books, and the many adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*), and as well as its often penetrating and always illuminating discussions of specific problems (such as the specifically cinematic notion of a "tradition of quality"). Leitch admirably succeeds in his main aim, which is to demonstrate how adaptation studies can move usefully beyond a restrictive literary framework to look at adaptations from a fresh and revealing perspective. Recent work has pointed adaptation studies away from formal analyses of singular texts toward those considerations of context, production history, and aesthetics that would be of interest to film scholars. Sarah Cardwell's *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester University Press, 2002), Kamilla Elliott's *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), Robert Stam's *François Truffaut and Friends: Modernism, Sexuality, and Film Adaptation* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), and Christine Geraghty's *Now a Major Motion Picture* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2007) are all major contributions to the field. Leitch's book occupies an honored place in this distinguished company. © 2009 R. Barton Palmer

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ANDREW UTTERSON

Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema, ed. Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord

Replete with an introduction—and even a poem—by R. Buckminster Fuller, Gene Youngblood's long out of print *Expanded Cinema* (E. P. Dutton, 1970) has all the trappings of the outer realms of late 1960s/early 1970s techno-utopianism, describing as it does a type of cinema rooted in new technology and associated ways of being. Nearly forty years later, *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema* considers Youngblood's legacy, with its contributors exploring the myriad ways in which cinema continues to evolve, most notably in relation to digital technology.

Influenced by Marshall McLuhan—not least his proclamation of a "global village"—and the aforementioned "Bucky," Youngblood subscribed to ideas such as the collective ownership of the planet and the "cosmic consciousness" of its increasingly connected citizens. Accordingly, *Expanded Cinema* occupied the utopian extreme of a widened spectrum of heightened discourse concerning the role of advanced technology in an era that witnessed both the moon landing of 1969 and the destructive power of the Vietnam War.

In this context, exponents of expanded cinema sought to utilize new tools—from developments in video and television to more outré techniques such as holography and sonar—for sensory experiences that would engage with a world increasingly rooted in technology. Mixed media and blurred boundaries brought together film, computer graphics, video, television, oscilloscopes, slide projection, light shows, dance, and other forms.

Responding to this history, the first section of *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*—"Expanding Cinema—Immersion"—considers the reconfigured screen (or screens), documenting multifarious attempts to move beyond the single frame: from the expanded cinema of Montreal's Expo 67 (Janine Marchessault) to contemporary experiments with IMAX and QuickTime (Haidee Wasson), web-based narratives (Sheila Petty), new editing tools (Abigail Child), and so on. Co-editor Marchessault points to Expo 67's "Labyrinth Pavilion"—which offered a participatory, multi-screen film experience—as an exemplar of cinema's early expansion, citing *Life* magazine's characterization of the event as nothing short of "A Film Revolution to Blitz Man's Mind" (34).

Whether "blitzed" or otherwise, mind alteration was a stated aim of expanded cinema, at least according to Youngblood's vision of a "synaesthetic cinema" that would unify the senses and bring together the peoples of the world. Expansion referred as much to an exploration of consciousness—facilitated by an interest in hallucinogenic drugs, meditative practices, Eastern religions, and so on—as to an expansion of cinema's underlying technology.

Taking Youngblood's lead, the editors of *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema* point to the wider world in which technology finds meaning, most notably in the book's second ("Digital Time—Archive") and third ("Liquid Space—Mobility") sections, which address new forms of temporality

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and spatiality respectively. With a purview far wider than the term "cinema" typically conveys, these chapters are framed according to the involvement of the moving image in the public sphere, an explicitly political or activist focus described as "an understanding of the digital not simply as a technology but also as an experience of space and time tied to capitalism" (14). Chapters cover topics as diverse as feminist digital aesthetics (Caitlin Fisher), Afro-futurism (Rinaldo Walcott), digital memory and genocide (Michael Uwemedimo and Joshua Oppenheimer), and military simulations and popular entertainment (Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter), reflecting the diverse fields and disciplines of the assembled contributors.

At times, the collection risks becoming too diffuse, too amorphous, to the point of conceptual collapse. Beyond the authorial unity of Youngblood's original work, these variously authored chapters threaten to become untethered, though they ultimately circle back to engage with a newly written piece by Youngblood.

The invective-heavy "What We Must Do," penned in the same evangelical tone as *Expanded Cinema*, reprised for a new generation, is focused on the progressive potential of the Internet. Youngblood's zeal provides a rhetorical suture connecting twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Outlining a manifesto of sorts, Youngblood implores us to fully utilize the Internet to realize "humankind's ultimate utopian dream—a global democratic public sphere" (323). "Talk"—by which he means "all forms of conversation including audiovisual" (322)—is described as being "the most powerful of human actions" (321) because it enables us to construct shared realities and political power, a continuation of the "cosmic consciousness" expounded in 1970.

If the techno-utopian verve of Youngblood's writing is atypical of the more sober contributions that make up the majority of this collection, *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema* comprises a compelling variety of takes in foregrounding his ideas and the search for contemporary resonances.

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KINO

HALF PAGE

LISTING TO STARBOARD

With these welcome books, David Thomson and Jonathan Rosenbaum have once again put us in their debt. Thomson's *"Have You Seen . . .?"* and Rosenbaum's *Essential Cinema* occupy separate orbits (and the latter's five interpenetrating sections trace mini-orbits of their own). But these intersect and overlap. Thomson gleefully arrays his "one thousand preferred films" (viii), arranged alphabetically from—yes—*Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (3) to *Zabriskie Point* (1002). Each film gets a page to itself, a thousand words or fewer, in two columns; Thomson has wisely "declined illustrations or a rating system" (viii), and has also declined an index, along with even a table of contents—since a flick-through will serve the purpose. (A minor cavil; Thomson names names. Specifically, he pads out some—not all—of his capsules with lists of some of those concerned with the film's production. It is not clear, for example, why the names of the fourteen players in Donen's *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* needed to be paraded forth, like the Dwarfs themselves, in a kind of mini-credit-crawl.)

"The pantheon of film culture," in Thomson's words, "is an untidy place" (ix) which is perhaps why people who write about films so love to make lists of them. Thomson introduces *"Have You Seen. . .?"* (which is itself a long, annotated list of films) with a list of (some) other people's lists of films—the *Sight and Sound* top ten of 1952, repeated every ten years thereafter; the 1958 Brussels poll of 117 historians and critics; the *Cahiers du Cinéma* polls from 1958 through 2002—and Jonathan Rosenbaum concludes *Essential Cinema* with another list of other people's more recherché lists on page 430 of his new afterword. While "a certain delirium of systematizing seems to characterize such efforts," as Rosenbaum freely admits, "they still testify to the vitality and utility of list-making during a period in which the bounty of film becoming available on DVD has become exciting and more than a little daunting" (430).

Thomson for his part is undaunted. He situates *"Have You Seen . . .?"* on the cusp of this shift to video. Video means quite simply that there "are so many fewer films that are hard to see" (xii). Rosenbaum would not wholeheartedly agree with him here, as we shall see, but the fact remains that since Thomson's subject matter is by definition what's out there, what's available for anyone with a DVD player to enjoy repeatedly, *"Have You Seen . . .?"* is a *jeu d'esprit*, a labor of love with no overall axe to grind—beyond urging his readers to kick back and enjoy themselves. Thinking back to the period when he was preparing his 1975 *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, Thomson admits, not altogether ruefully, that these days, by comparison with the 1970s, "I see fewer films in real dark, in great prints, on enormous screens. I watch the videos on television, and try to adjust for the diminution" (xii). In this Thomson is like so many of us of a certain age. We are in need—are we not?—of relief, not from "great prints" on "enormous screens" (the picture palaces are no more), but from being assailed at our local multiplexes by overloud Dolby systems, by rated previews of features they dissuade us from ever seeing, by the stench of popcorn, by faux-winsome ads for Stella Artois that may even—who knows?—have seemed funny once, and not least by boorish fellow "patrons." ("Too many new films are gestures trying to grab the interest of kids set on war games and PlayStations" [xiii], sniffs Thomson. But he's right—except that films based directly on videogames tend to flop because they are "too complex" for the rest of the audience. Brave new world, indeed . . .) If you love film, and if the above series of kvetches has even the faintest ring of familiarity, then *"Have You Seen . . .?"* deserves a place on your bookshelf.

A place perhaps adjacent to that occupied by *Essential Cinema*, which also lists its author's thousand favorite films in a chronological appendix. (Rosenbaum even tips his hand and nudges the reader by starring his very favorite hundred of these.) At the end of *"Have You Seen . . .?"* (1003–07) Thomson re-lists his thousand favorites in a chronology, which makes comparison easy—and telling. Of Rosenbaum's top one hundred, only forty-three are also listed by Thomson; on page xi of *"Have You Seen. . .?"* Thomson lists ten "talking comedies of undying appeal," all of them made between 1932–42 (*Trouble in Paradise*, *My Man Godfrey*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *His Girl Friday*, *The Lady Eve*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Midnight*, *Twentieth Century*, and *To Be or Not To Be*), adding with a flourish the words "now, *there* is a ten best built for fun"; of these, only three are listed among Rosenbaum's thousand best films. Somewhere along the line, it seems, the world just stopped being funny.

Rosenbaum claims he knows full well, as does Thomson, what is involved in "having too much irresponsible fun by

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finding pleasure" (xii) in the films he loves. But this comes as an admission he wrings out of himself, and is curiously put. (What would too much *responsible* fun look like?) Rosenbaum is not as indulgent, not as lighthearted as Thomson: while Thomson, to his credit, allows himself to kick back, relax, and enjoy himself, Rosenbaum kicks out—and this is to his credit too. There is a serious agenda at work in *Essential Cinema*. Rosenbaum's subtitle is *On the Necessity of Film Canons*. Even in its woefully short introduction—which I hope will point readers to Rosenbaum's other books (particularly *Movies as Politics*, *Movie Wars*, and *Placing Movies*)—it becomes clear that there is a complicated politics at work in U.S. film criticism, a politics that sees to it that the price of pleasure is steep.

"I've consciously sought to bridge academic and mainstream perspectives on film," Rosenbaum tells us, to break down "the barriers that keep academic film study and mainstream film culture in mutual ignorance about and alienated from each other" (xvi). In particular, while academic film critics were busily and in principle eschewing the discredited category of the film canon, films and filmmakers themselves "were being canonized in increasingly frivolous ways by the various promotional arms of the studios—starting with the Academy Awards, which have become increasingly prominent over the years, and continuing with the practice, begun in the 1980s, of listing the biggest box-office grosses week after week in newspapers, in magazines, and on TV" (xv). This is to say that "popularity contests as largely determined . . . by box-office receipts have constituted the only film canons taken seriously in American culture. And the disinclination of American film academics to offer any alternative canons has continued to give the industry an unchallenged playing field" (xv–xvi). Rosenbaum's project of "re-canonizing cinema in order to combat the reductive canons of studio publicists" (xvii) depends on how much responsibility is in fact borne by the academic *trahison des clercs* for the reach of these "film industry apologists," and this is a moot point. (Somebody or something appears to abhor a vacuum, which is perforce going to get filled from one direction or another, from the academy, the one with the groves, or from the Academy, the one that gives out the statuettes—and this is a huge assumption.) But Rosenbaum is right to have raised the issue, for the sorry state of affairs to which he points is not a moot point at all. (I recently encountered in my desultory reading a quote from one Eric Dash in an exposé of credit-rating agencies, which flourish on the fees paid to them by the very companies they monitor. "It is as if Hollywood studios paid movie critics to review their would-be blockbusters," splutters Dash. As if? Rosenbaum, again to his credit, is under no illusions about how misplaced these words are, about "the promotional campaigns of studios and their lackeys" [xvii], or about "the consumption machine that devours and digests commercial releases weekly" [286]).

Thomson says that in 1958 "it was very difficult to see old films, except at the archives, the museums, and the film societies" (x); Rosenbaum would add that it was difficult for a journeyman film critic in 2008 to see quite a lot of new films outside these same venues, provided that the films in question were defined as obscure (read "arty" and/or "foreign"). "Billions of dollars are now spent annually making and promoting a few dozen movies—most of them dogs—that the media obligingly make visible and label important, and everything else is consigned to oblivion. The most any obscure film can hope for is to compete with other obscure films. This is tantamount to tripling the number of passengers in steerage without increasing the provisions; more people get to travel, but everyone gets brutalized in the process" (130). "It's understandable that American audiences often wind up confusing promotional presence with cultural importance, since promotional presence seems to be the only gauge the mainstream media have for determining cultural importance" (68). But big promotional budgets, along with the continued importance of unpredictable and unmeasurable word-of-mouth recommendation prove "that the media bias in favor of dumb big-budget entertainment doesn't suffice to sell it to the masses" (69).

The listings this review has passed over (though Rosenbaum and Thomson do not) are of course the annual Academy Awards, which we have always with us. Thomson indicates that "so many of the Oscar decisions make us wary of passing judgments. The Best Picture award in its time has gone to *Mrs Miniver*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *Ordinary People*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Patton*, *Dancing with Wolves*, *Braveheart*, and *Crash*." This (shall we say) dubious inventory "tells us a lot about how a business system tries to pledge itself to a scheme of quality that it does not quite understand" (xiii). It also poses the question whether the Oscars have "become increasingly prominent" (xv)—in Rosenbaum's words—as opposed to having been just plain wrong all along.

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BOOK DATA Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons*, with a new afterword. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. $25.00 paper. 472 pages.

David Thomson, *"Have You Seen . . .?" A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. $39.95 cloth. 1024 pages.